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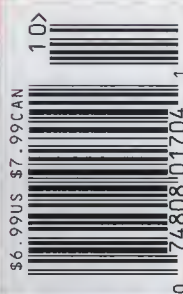
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**ASHERON'S  
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And the Rest of  
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NO. 143 / OCT 2002

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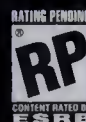
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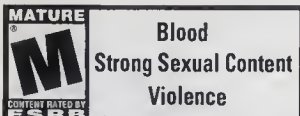




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## Computer Games

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#### PUBLISHER

Edward Cespedes

#### BUSINESS DIRECTOR

Ed Mitchell

#### EDITORIAL

Editor-in-Chief

Steve Bauman  
sbauman@cgonline.com

Features Editor

Cindy Yans  
cyans@cgonline.com

Hardware Editor

Jason Cross  
jcross@cgonline.com

#### ART/PRODUCTION

Art Director

Terri Davis  
Graphic Artist  
Carolynne R. Wang

#### TECHNOLOGY

Online Director  
Liz Haigas

#### ADVERTISING CONTACTS

Eastern & Central Sales Manager

Jeff Mather  
802-767-9144 x531  
jmather@cgonline.com

Western Sales Manager

Jeff Lubetkin  
818-222-7516  
jlubetkin@cgonline.com

#### CIRCULATION

Circulation Director

Alan Brush

Subscription Manager

Tina White

#### SUBSCRIPTION SERVICES

US Subscriptions: 800-283-3542

Outside US Subscriptions: 815-734-1216

Online Subscriptions: www.cgonline.com

subscriptions@cgonline.com

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Richmond, VT 05477

802-434-3060 FAX: 802-434-6493

editor@cgonline.com

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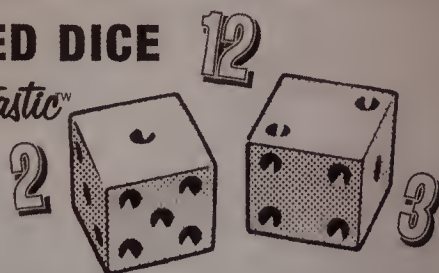
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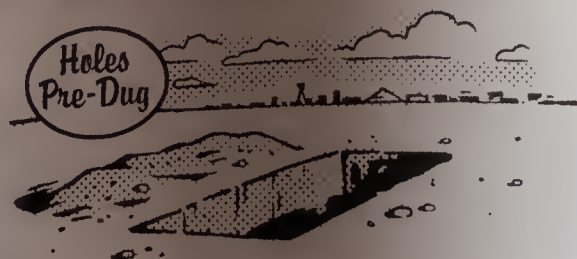
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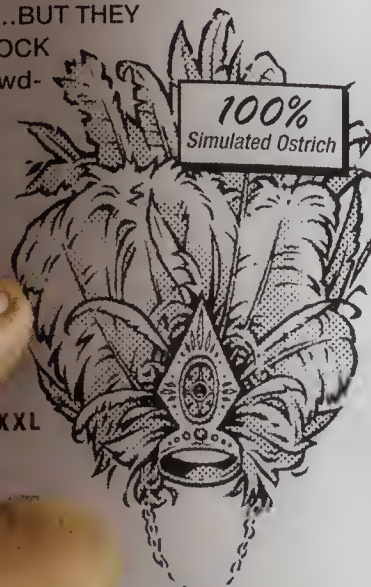
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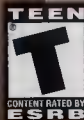
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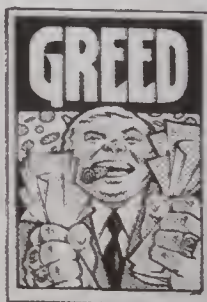
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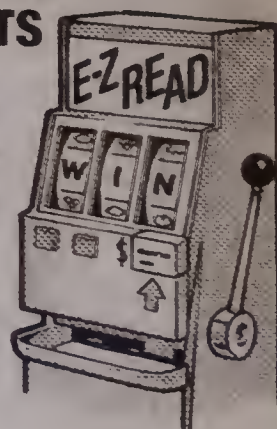
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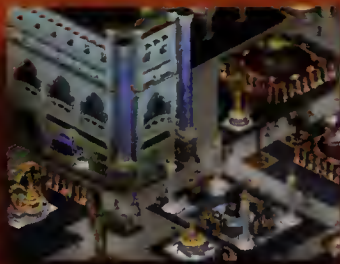
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# upfront

## i love everything

The once-in-a-blue-moon happy fun column

After writing a column for a few years, you end up covering all the pat topics. In this biz, there are the old standbys—games are too buggy/hard/easy/stupid/smart/fast/slow, publishers are greedy awful evil slimebags, developers are oppressed/pampered/overrated/underrated/morons/brilliant, piracy is good/bad/inevitable/stop-pable/unstoppable, etc. To combat the inevitable original idea rot, you start looking for inspiration wherever you can find it. After watching a particular movie—one of those non-annoying, uplifting and happy kinds of films that are so rare in today's world of fashionable cynicism—I was struck by a desire to avoid the negative, to only look for the positives in the gaming world.

So to start things off, I love the gamine charms of Audrey Tautou in *Amélie* (the movie in question), and to keep things somewhat on topic, the guy that talks about beer and crime in *No One Lives Forever*, though that's more of a manly non-sexual kind of thing, like my love of the Red Sox.

I love really awful games almost as much as good ones, but I love great ones better.

I love *Civilization*, *SimCity*, *DOOM*, *Sam & Max Hit the Road*, *No One Lives Forever*, *M.U.L.E.*, *Planetfall*, *Seven Cities of Gold*, *Half-Life*, *Ultima VII*, *Command & Conquer*, *Jedi Knight*, *RollerCoaster Tycoon*, *Front Page Sports Baseball*, *Heroes of Might and Magic*, *X-COM*, *Day of*

“I love every one of our readers that cares enough to offer suggestions, even when they ask for hot and sweaty pictures of Tom Chick.”

*the Tentacle*, *Quake*, and their various sequels, plus all the other games that simultaneously caused the erosion of my baseball skills and the expansion of my waistline while at the same time providing me with hours of entertainment and the semblance of a career.

I love winning, and the process of playing a game, more than I like losing, which is why I also love skill levels that actually match their description, i.e. “Easy” really is easy.

I love being able to ignore a manual, either because a game is intuitive or has a killer tutorial.

I love Cate Archer's hair.

I love that *MAME32* opened up my eyes to the sublime wonder that is the *Metal Slug* series, particularly when you get turned into a projectile vomiting zombie... it's definitely the very best side-scrolling-blow-up-everything-receive-the-gift-of-an-attack-monkey game in the world.

I love 2D strategy games a lot more than I love 3D ones, because not everything needs to be 3D despite what Phil Steinmeyer says on page 98.

I love the whole garage rock movement and wonder if the game industry will ever reach a point where it's financially viable to have smaller, quality games, and not have gamers reject them outright solely because they're low budget.

I love how 3D Realms refuses to release any information on *Duke Nukem Forever*, making it the most hyped non-hyped game in existence.

I love how people blame the press for hyping games yet don't realize that the only way they're exposed to it is when they actually actively seek it out.

I love how developers blame publishers for buggy and/or awful games but complain when the same publishers don't give them enough credit when a game turns out well.

I love every one of our readers that cares enough to offer suggestions, even when they ask for hot and sweaty pictures of Tom Chick.

I love how some game magazines assume their readers are so stupid they won't understand how their next issue is the MOST IMPORTANT EVER unless they spell it out to them, usually in ALL CAPS followed by exclamation points!!!

I love how game magazines sometimes try really hard to be funny but generally fail in such a spectacularly unfunny way that it's not even funny in a not-so-funny kind of way, but maybe it's just that multi-layered meta-irony all the kids love.

I love taking potshots all the time.

I love that our brilliantly warped staff comes to work everyday and never complains about the fact that the pay and hours suck, and our office furniture is an OSHA nightmare.

Finally, I love procrastinating for so long when writing this column that I'm forced to come up with a strained idea like this one.

Wait a second, I don't love that. Damn. ●





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*-Maxim Magazine*

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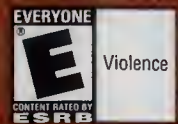
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# The Business of TERRORISM

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FBI Definition

## Game publishers react and release games the wake of September 11

by John Callahan

The terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001 cast a dark pall over the country, and indeed the world. Suddenly the idea of creating chaos in the US thanks to a select few fanatical individuals was no longer the stuff of movies, TV shows or PC games. Some PC game publishers quickly delayed releasing products that even hinted at terrorism after the attacks (almost all of those games were eventually released, however) At the same time some retailers wasted no time pulling existing games with those themes from store

[top] In America's Army, your appanents always appear to you as terrorists, but from their own perspective they're members of the Army and you're a terrorist. >>> [right] The plot of Soldier of Fortune II Involves threats of blaterrism. >>> [far right] Perhaps the most questionable part of Tactical Ops is its chalice of subtitle: Assault on Terror



shelves (again, those games showed back up again after a couple of months).

Nearly a year after the attacks, the sensibilities of PC gamers have shifted back to normal, perhaps due to the quick fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Indeed, some games are not only using terrorism themes



but a few are actively referencing real world events that occurred after September 11.

### The overt references

The PC game that most directly deals with the after-effects of September 11 is *Delta Force: Task Force Dagger*, a first person military shooter that should be on store shelves by the time you read this. Developed by Zombie Studios for NovaLogic, the game depicts American forces in Afghanistan going after the Taliban during Operation Enduring Freedom. "Zombie examined a great deal of publicly available information and presented the idea that the missions undertaken in Afghanistan would also



[from top counterclockwise] Global Operations is one of many terrorist-themed games released earlier this year. >>> Siman and Schuster Interactive goes back to the war on terrorism this fall with Real War: Rogue States. >>> Delta Force: Task Force Dagger is set during Operation Enduring Freedom



make for some great gameplay," says NovaLogic's Wes Eckhart. "The *Task Force Dagger* campaigns are loosely based on many of those missions."

Some people might believe that such a game might try cash in on the post September 11 events, but Eckhart disagrees. "Video games are a form of entertainment and a vehicle many people use as a safe, fun way to escape from reality for a short while," he says. "These real-life conflicts provide a good starting point for game fiction. NovaLogic has produced military-oriented games for over 16 years. We are always careful not to sensationalize war in our products."

While Eckhart concedes that there is always a risk creating a game based on a volatile real event like Operation Enduring Freedom, he adds, "Delta Force fans and gamers in general are concerned with exciting, intense gameplay. *Delta Force: Task Force Dagger* provides exactly that, without becoming involved in the politics of the Afghanistan conflict."

### Terrorism themed games

Other first person shooter games that have been recently released don't directly tie into September 11 but do deal with terrorism in some form include *Global Operations* and *Soldier of Fortune II: Double Helix*, both of which were under development long before the terrorist attacks. In the case of

the latter game, which features bioterrorism threats as the main storyline, Raven Software's Brian Raffel points out it's a fictional game. "It is not intended to represent real world events. The characters and organization within the game are solely intended as a backdrop for the game's action."

Another recent game is the team-based shooter *Tactical Ops: Assault on Terror*, the stand-alone retail version of a popular *Unreal Tournament* mod. In addition to the title of the game itself and the fact that it deals with team play against an unnamed terrorist organization, *Tactical Ops*'s ad campaign references Afghanistan in magazine ads. Nancy Bushkin, the vice president for corporate communications for Infogrames, said sales for war-oriented games have surged since September 11, much like war movies became popular in the same time period. "*Tactical Ops* does not seek to glorify terrorism or terrorist activity in any way, and like those films, it was in development and production long before September 11," she says.



Like Eckhart, Bushkin believes games like *Tactical Ops* are not intended to exploit real world tragedies. "There will always be critics, especially of games that contain violence of any kind, and they are most certainly entitled to their opinions," she says. "In fact, Infogrames has always been and remains against gratuitous violence in its games." She believes there is, and should be, a different standard for historical games (such as depictions of specific wars) or certain kinds of role-playing games. "*Tactical Ops* would fall into that category."

The trend of terrorist-themed games doesn't seem to be slowing down anytime soon. Simon and Schuster is planning on releasing the real-time strategy game *Real War: Rogue States*, this fall. It's a sequel to *Real War*, which depicted the US Army going after an organized terrorist force. Despite being released just a few weeks after September 11, the game was successful enough to commission a follow up. However, the company's vice president and creative director Jeff Siegel said references to real world events will only be touched upon loosely in the sequel. "We started by exploring the concept that there was a power—perhaps one or more states—supporting the ILA, the terrorist organization in the first game, in a shadowy sort of way,

and we went on from there," he says. "It could be seen as reflecting the 'axis of evil' concept that has been talked about by the President."

### Into the future

Of course, the terrorist threats that seemed to loom large after September 11 in the US have abated somewhat, but what happens if and when future terrorist events in the US occur? Will gamers and game publishers want to explore such themes?

"It's impossible to predict with any certainty but if recent trends are any indication, it would seem that there would always be an audience for this genre," says Bushkin.

"It's hard to say," says Siegel. "If things got really extreme in that direction, I think people would want more of an escape when they play games, and so you might see other themes. Then again, many people expressed—on bulletin boards and the like—the feeling that [*Real War*] helped them deal with some of their anger. That might continue in the future." ●

## This is Your Brain on Games

Study claims videogames cause permanent brain damage

by Kyle Ackerman

**Gaming causes an** overall degradation of mental faculties associated with creativity, concentration, and control of temper, according to Akio Mori. A professor of Neurology at Nihon University, Mori claimed children who play video games are at risk of developing "Video Game Brain," permanently suppressing certain brain activities. His recommendation is to play outside, and don't play videogames.

Mori's group examined 240 people between the ages of six and 29, and measured brain wave activity before during and after play over several months. Alpha waves are often associated with a resting state, while beta waves in the prefrontal region may be associated with emotional functions, planning and self-control. Gamers in the study group showed less prefrontal beta wave activity the more they played games. Those who spent 2-7 hours a day playing showed little activity at all. Worse yet, the beta wave activity didn't seem to return, even once they stopped playing games.

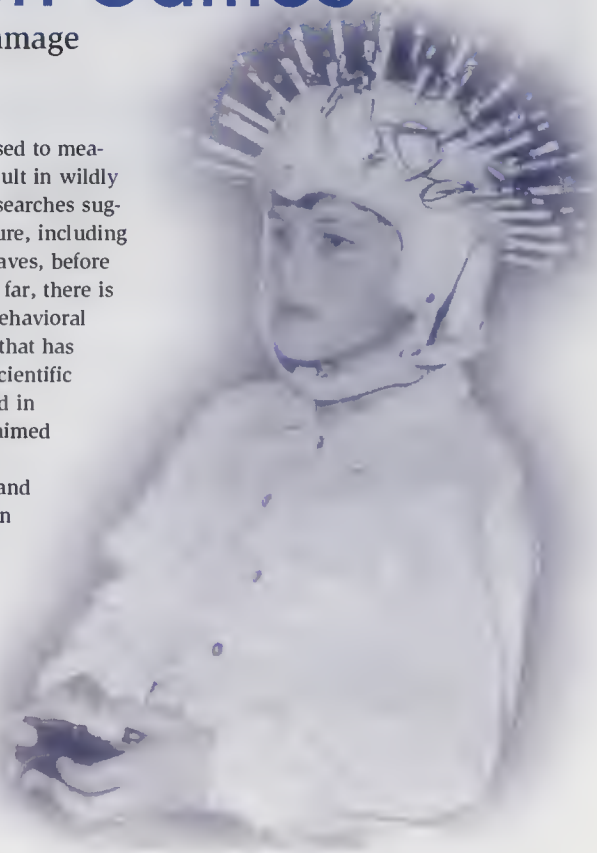
Don't take your hands off the WASD keys yet. Scientists remain skeptical of Mori's findings. Neither his results nor his methods have been published so there is no way to evaluate their quality. Imprecise

placement of the electrodes used to measure the brainwaves could result in wildly misleading data, and other researches suggest looking at a broader picture, including other activity such as theta waves, before making hasty conclusions. So far, there is no evidence of a permanent behavioral effect caused by video games that has achieved a consensus in the scientific community. A study published in 2001 by Ryuta Kawashima claimed that playing computer games reduced frontal lobe activity, and would permanently stunt brain development. This conclusion was widely dismissed by the scientific community due to a lack of evidence.

So are you feeling less creative? Perhaps combative and distempered? Dennis Schutter of Utrecht University in the Netherlands speculated publicly on the lack of beta wave activity in Mori's study. Without seeing the data, he guessed that the absence of beta waves was probably attributable to fatigue, and not the games themselves. So if you are having

trouble making friends or concentrating, perhaps you shouldn't stay up until 4AM playing games.

But you probably already knew that. ●







## Pirate Sunk by Gaming Booty

Angry gamer feels he's being ripped-off by computer game companies

by Date Tudge

**Jesse Bergevin** (not his real name) is not satisfied with the quality of computer games he has been pirating from the Internet lately. Bergevin, an avid gamer, doesn't believe he's getting his "time's worth" with the recent crop of PC games he has illegally obtained. Bergevin has been pirating gaming software since he was 13 and thinks that this year has been the worst year yet for quality titles.

Most of Bergevin's gaming software is acquired through binaries newsgroups, FTP sites, and through friends. Over the years he has played many high-quality games, such as *Quake*, *Unreal*, and *Half-Life*, none of which he paid retail for, yet all of which he enjoyed. However, recently, Bergevin has found that many of the programs being distributed are disappointing, and he has become disinterested after playing them to completion.

"I spent two-and-a-half hours downloading *Dungeon Siege* off of a private FTP server, and another twenty minutes finding a crack for the executable file," said Bergevin. "After playing the game for a week, putting in approximately 29 hours of gameplay, I was absolutely bored with the point-and-click style of game. That's two blank CDs I'll never get back."

Bergevin is concerned that computer game producers are not spending enough effort on

gameplay, and that they are not really trying to impress his demographic—young males living at home with little or no disposable income. He thinks that they're all just interested in packaging a fancy title with showy graphics, recognizable acting voices, and glitzy cinematics.

"These big-game companies just don't appreciate our consumer group," said Bergevin, who has two Pentium 4's, with GeForce 4 video cards, and two 19" monitors. He also has a 40X speed CD-burner for "backing-up" his programs. "If I was inclined to go out and buy any of these software titles, I would be sending e-mails and letters complaining about the lack of playability in these games."

Bergevin recently got a copy of BioWare's *Neverwinter Nights* from a friend, and has been barely been able to keep interest in it, while playing it for up to fourteen hours a day for each of the past twelve days.

"It's a good thing I have two machines, and I was able to play a bootleg version of *WarCraft III: Reign of Chaos* at the same time," said Bergevin. "I was also playing *Medal of Honor*, which I played from start to finish, but if that's the best that these designers can do, that'll be the last shooter I ever download. I mean it."

"As a consumer, I go out and purchase CD-writers, blank CDs on which to burn copyrighted software illegally, and of course jewel cases, CD binders, labels, and felt-tipped markers," said Bergevin. "After that investment I feel cheated when a game producer distributes a game that I'm only going to play solidly for a month before storing it on the shelf."

Bergevin expressed his disappointment by deleting his hacked version of *Zoo Tycoon* from his hard drive, without burning the image onto a CD. He then pulled out an old "copy" of *Total Annihilation*, and proceeded to install it onto his machine using a CD-key generator.

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# GATE ARCHER ISN'T LIKE OTHER SPIES





## WHAT ARE YOU PLAYING? |||||

**Bill Roper****Vice President, Blizzard**

"Dark Age of Camelot is my current addiction. The guys at Mythic did a bang-up job. Whenever I want to escape to the solitude of a single-player role-playing game, I boot up *Neverwinter Nights*. After months and months of testing and tweaking, I still have to get my online fix of *WarCraft III* every day. And *Grand Theft Auto III* is easily the best game of last year on any platform.

**Rod Fung****Executive Producer, Sierra**

"I've been playing a bunch of *Day of Defeat* lately... in fact I'm addicted to it. I think the level designers came up with some convincing environments that work really well in a multiplayer setting. I've also been playing EA Sports' *FIFA 2002*. Unfortunately, I lent it to some of my *SWAT: Urban Justice* team members and they haven't given it back to me, so I'm going through withdrawal from not playing it."

**Brian Reynolds****President, Big Huge Games**

"I've been playing a lot of *Dungeon Siege*. I liked the way you develop your character by actually doing the thing that—well, whatever you do, your character kind of goes that way. And it's beautiful. I also played some *Neverwinter Nights*. With a role-playing game, I can have more fun, as I'm not constantly analyzing every little thing [about it]."

## SPOTLIGHT

**Three for all****Warcraft III action figures, \$10.00**

Straight from the land of Azeroth to your collectible shelves come three very detailed action figures from the world of *Warcraft III*. Each standing between 5 1/2 and 6 1/2 inches high, with approximately eight points of articulation, the units are sturdier than Blizzard's *Diablo* figures, and each carries removable weapons. With a hammer as large as his torso, the orc war chief Thrall is extremely pleased to be part of this collection after his disappointment over losing his starring role with the cancellation of *Warcraft Adventures*; dwarven mountain king Muradin Bronzebeard, with his mustache divided into pigtails, double-wields an immense axe along with his own torso-

sized hammer; and the horned night elf, arch-druid Furion Stormrage carries a feathered staff. Please, no one tell him that he's purple. It seems that the Undead and the Burning Legion opted out of the collection because they refused to stand still long enough to pose.

## OFFBEAT

**Mouseball Bowling and More**

**Computer Waiting Games: Activities for the Impatient**  
\$14.95

According to some efficiency experts, the average computer user spends nine minutes every day waiting for files and websites to

download, not even counting the time to reboot after crashes. Quirk Books offers you a solution, no, many solutions for how to fill up these 54

or more hours per year. *Computer Waiting Games*, with its clever mouse-pad cover, introduces cartoon pals Barbara, Lloyd, Judy, and Patti as they demonstrate numerous activities that will fill up these deathly boring hours with productive, fun, mirth-inducing activities. Consider Power Strip Russian Roulette, Mouse Pad Ouija Board, and Printer Cable Calisthenics. These are only a few of the more than 50 how-to projects, puzzles, games, and activities to do during the time you used to stare at your monitor, slack-jawed, while it performs its mind-numbingly-boring series of memory tests. What are you waiting for?

## TOP SELLERS

1

**WARCRAFT III: REIGN OF CHAOS**  
Blizzard Entertainment  
Rating ★★★★★

2

**NEVERWINTER NIGHTS**  
Infogrames  
Rating ★★★★★

3

**THE SIMS: VACATION**  
Electronic Arts  
Rating ★★★½

4

**GRAND THEFT AUTO III**  
Rockstar  
Rating ★★★½

5

**THE SIMS**  
Electronic Arts  
Rating ★★★½

6

**MEDAL OF HONOR: ALLIED ASSAULT**  
Electronic Arts  
Rating ★★★½

7

**WARCRAFT III: COLLECTOR'S EDITION**  
Blizzard Entertainment  
Rating ★★★★★

8

**BACKYARD BASEBALL 2003**  
Infogrames  
Not Rated

9

**JEDI KNIGHT II: JEDI OUTCAST**  
LucasArts  
Rating ★★★½

10

**SOLDIER OF FORTUNE II**  
Activision  
Rating ★★★★★

11. Zoo Tycoon; 12. The Sims: Hot Date; 13. Dungeon Siege; 14. The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind; 15. StarCraft: Battle Chest; 16. Harry Potter & The Sorcerer's Stone; 17. The Sims: Livin' Large; 18. Zoo Tycoon: Dinosaur Digs; 19. RollerCoaster Tycoon Gold; 20. Diablo II Expansion Set: Lord of Destruction

Source: NPD Techworld





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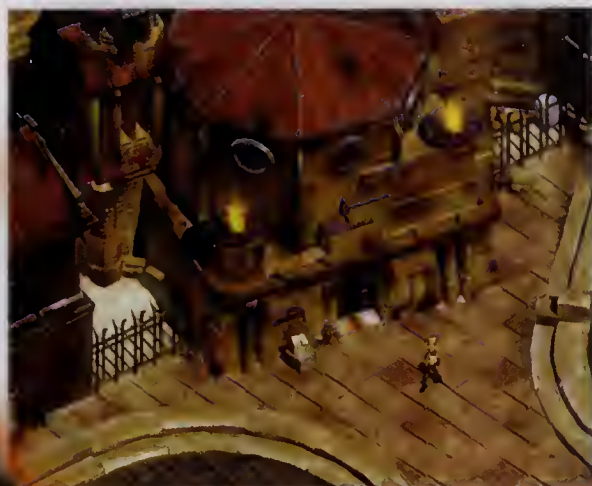
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# Fallout Fantasy

Give a S.P.E.C.I.A.L welcome to Lionheart

by Cindy Yans

**Fact:** In 1187,

Saladin, leader of the Muslim world, assembled his forces and overtook Jerusalem. This royally ticked off Europe's royalty. **Fact:** Frederick Barbarossa of Germany, Philip Augustus of France, and Richard the Lionheart of England all descended upon the region, and between 1188 and 1192, conducted what became known as the Third Crusade. **Fact:** Barbarossa couldn't swim and was drowned. **Fact:** Toward the end of 1191, Philp bailed and returned to France. **Fact:** Richard fought on, and he and Saladin underwent a series of miscommunications, resulting in the massacre of many Muslim hostages. At this point, Richard he felt his position had become strong enough to demand tribute. **Fact:** Saladin said "uh-uh."

**Fiction:** One of Richard's advisors had a bright idea. Richard should amass a bunch of holy relics and use them to perform a ritual blessing on his forces. **Fiction:** Gathering all of that holiness in one place caused the fabric of reality to rip. **Fiction:** This caused a leak in the

[clockwise from upper left] Another day at the Druid Council comes to fistcuffs. >>> The brick motif feels as though it has stepped out of The City of Lost Children. >>> A lightning bolt, and no Thor in sight. >>> Cutaway walls open up the room's view.

fabric known as The Disjunction through which magic began to seep. In Pandora-like fashion, along with it were released ghosties, demons, evil spirits, and other unnatural oddities. **Fiction:** Richard and Saladin said, "Unholy \$#| +!" and together they sealed the portal. This event, however, set loose powers that would change the face of history forever. In order to stop a repeat of the Disjunction, Richard and Saladin divided up and hid the relics in their lands, entrusting them to organizations like the Knights Templar and the Order of Saladin. Ironically, although the Christian and



Muslim forces became far more cooperative, ending the Crusades, the world is still a mess thanks to the remaining demonic powers. This is the mish-mash of real and fake history that weaves the backstory for Black Isle Studios' next role-playing endeavor, *Lionheart*.

### What's going on here?

Poof. It's 1588. The setting is Nueva Barcelona, constructed upon the ruins of what was once, perhaps, Ye Olde Barcelona. It is the year of the Spanish Armada, the year of England's occupation of Northern France, the birth year of Thomas Hobbes, and the Spanish Inquisition is attempting to wipe out all magical elements from the face of the Earth. You are a descendant of the gone-but-not-forgotten Richard. As you look around, you see that what might have been the glorious awakening of the Renaissance has been tainted with the dark, post-cataclysmic pall of a new Dark Age.

Black Isle and Reflexive Entertainment have taken the geography and demographics of this era and created a would-be scenario of life in Western Europe had the alleged "Disjunction" actually taken place. As in many games of this type, you initially don't have a clue. "The player plays an ancestor of Richard, but at the beginning of the story, the true impact of that legacy is not really known by the player or the character," explains Feargus Urquhart, President of Black Isle Studios. "As the story progresses the true weight of this ancestry begins to take shape and how it

Purebloods, Demokin, Feralkin and Sylvants. Your selection of race will ultimately determine how the game plays out for you. The pure-blood humans are the so-called "normal" people who remained unaffected by The Disjunction. As such, there are more of them than of the rest, and they tend to be socio-centric and persecute those that are different from them. The rest of the races display a magically-influenced effect. "The demokin show the influences of a fiendish or impish spirit," says producer Chris Parker. "They can usually blend in with humans and have a decent propensity for magic. The Feralkin descend from one with or affected by a beast spirit. Feralkin have the greatest



Pureblood male

Demokin male

“A believable fantasy world may sound like a contradiction, but we tried to come up with enough of a new spin on fantasy with enough things that were familiar to people to give them something that was interesting, but not far enough away from things that they already knew...”

can influence the future course of mankind.” In total, there are nine different main areas, each of which contains a variety of different maps to explore. As the game progresses, you'll travel north through the Pyranees and finally into France to visit other areas of turmoil.

At the outset, you'll see that humanity has evolved into four sub-species:

trouble fitting in with society due to their incredible physical ability and incredible physical anomalies. The Sylvant have at one point been affected by an Elemental spirit.”

### When Fallout had risen and Torn was torn

Several things influenced decisions about the game's world and its focus. "It started with the fact that we tried to come up with a believable fantasy world for *Torn*," says Urquhart, "A believable fantasy world may sound like a contradiction, but we tried to come up with





enough of a new spin on fantasy with enough things that were familiar to people to give them something that was interesting, but not far enough away from things that they already knew so they wouldn't get lost. We went back to the drawing board and tried to think about why *Fallout* was a success. A part of it was the look of the game, another part was the game system, and yet



[clockwise from upper left] Courtyard fantasy life, and fun with toothpicks. >>> Too much room at the inn. >>> The crystal monolith—water or ice? >>> A small shard of *Myst* III invades Western Europe.

another part we felt was how the world was based on earth but with a skewed history."

Reflexive Entertainment has polished up its own Velocity engine for this occasion. Formerly used for action games, it seemed like a great fit for this title, according to

the Black Isle production team. It's a 2D, isometric engine, displays tiled, prerendered backgrounds, while rendering 3D models of characters into 2D sprites on the screen. Early on, one of Reflexive's biggest worries was how were they minimize outrageous memory requirements given the number of frames of animation and types of equipment they wanted to have. They knew they could switch the drawing over to 3D, but then they would lose all of the anti-aliasing effects with the 2D backgrounds. So, they came up with this process of rendering the 3D characters on the fly, and then drawing them as 2D sprites. "That really makes it a win-win situation," says Urquhart.

Along with Velocity's rebirth, is that of *Fallout's*

S.P.E.C.I.A.L. game system (Strength, Perception, Endurance, Charisma, Intelligence, Agility, and Luck), which is taking its first leap into real-time. However, everything is still based on the original stats of its turn-based incarnation. In other words, things like Action Points still affect the overall speed of your character and how fast you can move. But

they've combined Action Points and basic stats in order to create your combat and magic speed. Plus, they've had to swap out a number of the skills for melee weapon and magic skills, since unlike *Fallout*, *Lionheart* takes place in a world of swords and sorcery rather than mini-guns and EMP grenades. Once again, your character's "Perks" will be important, and many of them will be the same ones used in the *Fallout* games.

*Lionheart* aspires to follow in the footsteps of greats such as *Planescape Torment*, and the much-lauded *Baldur's Gate* and its progeny. Quite an aspiration, to be sure. Even after have recognized the wisdom in stepping back from its fledgling but woe-ful-looking *Torn*, Black Isle still needs to prove that it's got what it takes to compete with this year's stunningly rich pool of RPGs. So, it has until Christmas to attempt to wipe the floor with

*Morrowind*, *Neverwinter Nights*, *Dungeon Siege*, and the like. Gulp. ●





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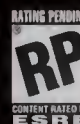


Strategy First



**“Diablo with a history lesson”**  
- GameSpot -

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## Ready to Strike Back

Sudden Strike II offers another real-time take on World War II

by Peter Suciu

There have been numerous attempts to streamline the micromanagement and resource-gathering elements out of real-time strategy games, and some have been better than others. One title that really managed to stand out in this way was *Sudden Strike*, which recreated the fast-paced action of World War II yet was closer in gameplay to *Command & Conquer* than *Close Combat*. Fans of this game will be glad to hear that *Sudden Strike II* is on the way.

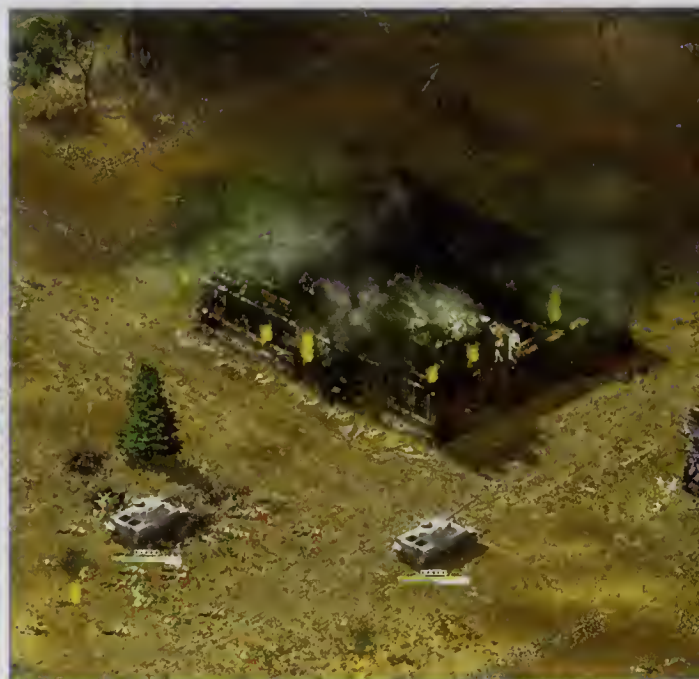
Among the most notable of the improvements in this sequel are more historically accurate damage modeling and a greater sense of unit balancing. Where the previous game tried to accommodate balance by leveling the playing field so that tanks were essen-

tially just tanks, *Sudden Strike II* is taking into account the vast differences between the types of armor. Thus most of the Allied armor on the Western Front won't stand up quite as well to the advanced German Tiger and Panther tanks—and as a result you will have to vary your tactics accordingly. Buildings, bridges, houses, fortifications, and even trees will now be destructible, and you can look forward to variable weather conditions in both winter and summer as you play through the various campaigns, which now include bouts in the Pacific.

There will be more than 50 new unit types along with controllable boats, planes, and even trains to transport men and supplies. As expected, the usual assortment of tanks, trucks, and other vehicles will be making a return. You'll be able to capture all of these vehicle types, as well as vital airbases, which you should protect at all costs, as they are crucial lifelines for supplies and reinforcements. Enemies can overrun and capture these bases, as well as subjecting them to artillery fire and bombardment.

The plan is to integrate morale and experience into each unit so that they'll act more realistically. Experienced troops will be better in combat than green replacements, and will be able to take more oncoming fire before needing to retreat. Officers will further encourage your troops to

[above] The beginning of the Longest Day. >>> [right] German panzers fight the Soviet juggernaut. >>> [far right] Tiger tanks on their glarious sweep against the Bolsheviks.





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Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos image courtesy of Blizzard Entertainment

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improve morale, while taking endless fire or having bombs dropped on your forces will have the opposite effect.

The game will support larger forces in individual missions, and you can look forward to some fairly large battles that will unfold with more than a thousand units on screen at a time. Finally, the design team is also tweaking the multiplayer mode, this time focusing on zones of control where you and your rivals will fight to hold key territory to acquire reinforcements and thus win the game.

*Sudden Strike II* is scheduled for release this fall. ●

Von Ryon's Express moves down the rails.



## Rust Never Sleeps

Fight the war that never went away in *Iron Storm*

by Robert Mayer

**The First World War**, or the Great War as it was known before its big brother WWII came along, ended in 1918. In 1917, the Russian Revolution kicked off, ultimately bringing the Communists under V. I. Lenin to power. These two events—Germany's defeat in the West, Communism's victory in the East—shaped the modern world in ways that still affect us. Now, imagine a world where none of this happened. A world where WWI kept going into the 1960s. A world where the Communists lost their bid for power and were crushed by a fanatical tyrant even more ruthless than they.

Imagine the world of *Iron Storm*.

Melodramatic? Maybe, but the premise is at least intriguing. This first and third-person shooter from developer 4X Studios puts you in the trenches of a perpetual Flander's fields, where machine guns and helicopters, artillery and television all converge.

The United States of Western Europe, including the US and much of the German army, stand toe to toe with the Russo-Mongolian hordes of the evil Baron Ungern-Sternberg, who having crushed Lenin's forces now wants to establish his own empire stretching from the Pacific to the Atlantic. You're Second Lieutenant Weasel, called Wiz by his friends; your job is to thwart this madman in his bid for world domination.

Geez, if this is what they

make butterbars do, what happens when you make Captain?

The game, due for both PC and PlayStation 2, sports solid 3D graphics, and lots of quirky then-and-now juxtapositions, like Edwardian uniforms and interiors punctuated by thoroughly modern assault rifles. While the whole idea is faintly silly—the Germans had figured out how to break the trench warfare deadlock in 1918, so why are the armies still stuck in the mud in 1964?—it is at least interesting, if only because the setting is so good for general mayhem. Expect infiltration and combat missions, plus the usual multiplayer options when the war heats up later this year. ●



[upper] it looks like something out of 1917, only with soldiers we'd think were futuristic if we lived in 1958. >>> [lower] Concrete is still popular in 1964.



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# Ghost Master

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*Empire* lets you call the shots from an overhead, isometric view: Just where will you put those god-awful Talking Camel statues and hokey sword-in-the-stone displays? How will the beckoning mazes of slot machines be arranged? How will special shows and events cater to the current visiting crowds of tourists and business execs? Just how toxic or watered-down will the drinks be? And how will roaming Security and Guest Services cope with rowdy patrons, puking drunks and the inevitable spies sent by rival casinos? *SimCity*, meet *SinCity*. You can even play hands of Blackjack at your own house tables.

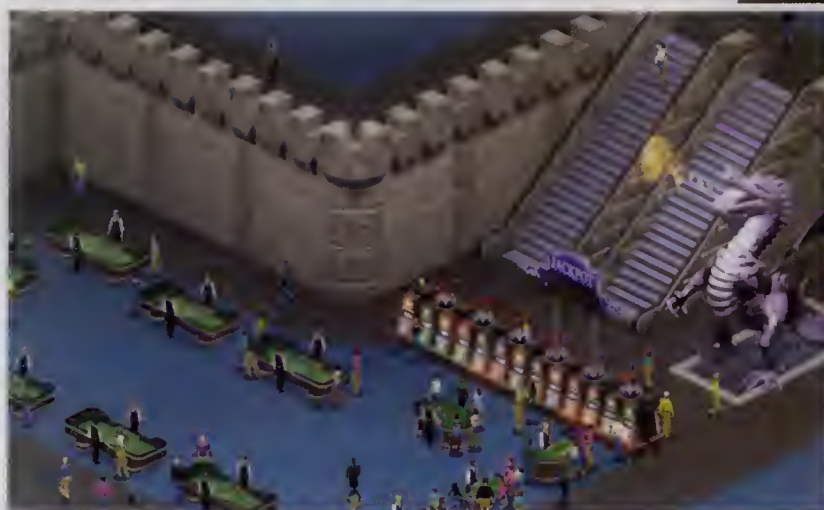
As you upgrade each casino to its economically-ideal stature—with victory signaled by external casino views complete with gaudy lasers and fireworks—you can move on to manage more prestigious gambling venues,

## The City of Lost Wages

Live the Vegas dream in *Casino Empire*

by Chris Hudak

If you've visited Las Vegas and haven't at least briefly dabbled in the fantasy of running your own casino, the problem likely lies in one of two key areas: a lack of ambitious vision or the fact that you're a lying sack of crap, Pal Joey. After years of



[clockwise from top] Dealers surround the anubis and camel statues—can you say “Luxor”? >>> Keep track of your evilly gotten gains. >>> Stane walls and fire dragons. Can you say “Excalibur”?

letting gamers merely partake in the virtual casino experience, Sierra finally helps us get in touch with our Inner Smarm through the operation of our own gambling Mecca. In *Casino Empire*, you'll oversee a fledgling Vegas Strip casino from the ground up—floor layout, decoration, house odds, security, alcoholic-drink content and more.

Shamelessly emulating casino archetypes (such as the Egypt-themed Luxor, the Pirate-salted Treasure Island, the cheesily-medieval Excalibur, and others), *Casino*

constantly whittling down the competition until the entire Strip is at your tacky, glitzy command. Visiting, wandering “celebrities” voice their approval or disdain of your digs with humorous (and well-voiced) impersonations, and the game soundtrack will of course feature tunes from the likes of Tom Jones, the Brian Setzer Orchestra, and similar Sin City “Sinobites.” Whaddaya want, scantily-clad dancers? Oh, wait—it's got those, too. Viva Las Vegas! ●



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## Slay Dragon, Rescue Princess

Dirk the Daring is back in *Dragon's Lair 3D*

by Jason Cross

There are few gamers over the age of 25 who can't remember standing in an arcade back in 1983 with their jaws on the floor, marveling at the amazing *Dragon's Lair*. It was a huge success and spawned many imitators. Those laser-disc games were like a laundry list of game design no-nos: totally linear, dependant more on memorization than skill, and loaded with instant-death gotchas around every corner, but it worked.

Now almost 20 years later, Dirk is reborn in 3D. Rather than the simple "press up...now!" gameplay of the original, this time you'll use a standard WASD movement setup with full mouselook to control our stalwart hero through a full 3D castle. You won't always die from one mistake anymore (Dirk has a health meter) and it's not all about memorization, but most of the other elements remain. The remake is loaded with gotchas, jumping puzzles, timing challenges, etc. Oddly enough, it still works.

Fortunately, UbiSoft's modernization also has all the wonderful personality of the arcade classic. The cel-shaded creatures are given wonderfully exaggerated animations and the 3D castle itself harkens back to the colorful tones of the original's hand-painted backgrounds. You're still dodging the evil wizard Mordroc's traps to reach the proverbial dragon's lair and rescue barely-dressed blonde bim...er...princess Daphne. The castle is greatly expanded this time around, and filled with far more puzzles, but those hoping to tackle all the old classics won't be disappointed.

It may not be the most sophisticated game in the world, but *Dragon's Lair 3D* reminds us that sometimes simple is good, and even a game consisting entirely of jump puzzles and gotchas can be fun. And as Samuel Jackson said in *Pulp Fiction*, "personality goes a long way." ●



[counterclockwise from top] If you were stalked by that guy, you'd be worried too. >>> A familiar sight to everyone who played the original. >>> Down to the idle animations, *Dragon's Lair 3D* is full of giggle-inducing gogs.





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- Close to a hundred skills to learn through a new character development system
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- More than 150 NPCs with different intelligent patterns of behavior
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Which fate is yours? It's your decision, one that will influence the gameplay of Divine Divinity as an action-based RPG or a classic RPG! According to prophecy, you are the chosen one, and only you will be able to save the legendary land of Rivellon from submission under the Lord of Chaos. But before you take on the fight against Evil, you must be discovered and blessed as the Divine Savior. You must remember one thing: Caution is vital! The apostate magicians must not get hold of you - whatever happens! Choose your fate: Warrior, Wizard or Survivor?

PC Gamer "A heavyweight RPG contender"

WAVEMASTER from "an epic story"

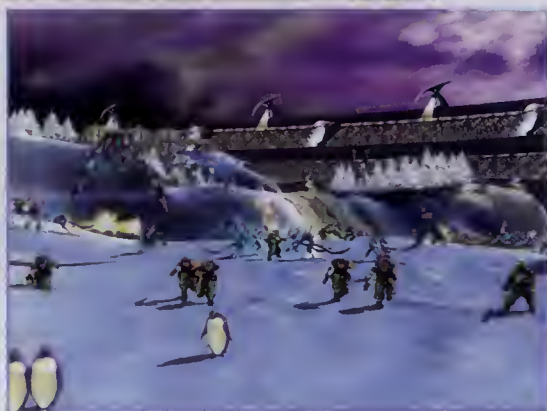


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tells us that none of this is played straight, and he describes the game as “*Princess Bride* meets *Flash Gordon*.” In other words, cheesy sci-fi humor. Scenes of comic-book-style art reveal the plot, but the action is all 3D, all the time. And make no mistake, it’s more about action than slow-paced strategy. “When the development team plays *Gladiators* and then goes back to *Red Alert*, *StarCraft*, *WarCraft*, or any of the other real-time strategy games,” he says, “they can not believe how slow they all seem.” He even likens the game to *Counter-strike*, in that you jump right in and are immediately faced with enemies. There’s no base building at all, although you can find “cards” (also known as “power-ups”) on the battlefield. These are the one resource you may cash in to add additional units when you control a few spawn zones on each map. The single-player missions—six per gladiator, set on various terrains—appear fairly puzzle-like, and multiplayer

will include full co-op play through the single-player game as well as the usual capture the flag and skirmish variants. You can enter many different buildings for additional cover and pretty much destroy everything except the ground and the water, including said buildings, the vegetation, and of course penguins. Who doesn’t want to blow up penguins?

How it will all play out in the end remains a distinct unknown, as neither Arxel Tribe or developer Eugen Systems has a track record with this kind of game. The 3D graphics look quite good at this stage, with plenty of chrome for those wacky effects fetishists. You can even try to win the crowd’s favor... does that mean you’ll win your freedom? Who knows, but you might find out this fall when the game appears on store shelves. ●

[above] Army troops enter a transport while the aliens attack and the crowd looks on. >>> [center] Save the penguins! Won’t someone think of the penguins? >>> [below] You can enter buildings to get defensive and offensive bonuses.

## Unleash Wacky Hell

Comedy meets 3D action tactics in *The Gladiators*

by Steve Bauman

From out in left field, i.e. France, comes *The Gladiators: Galactic Circus Games*, a tactics-only 3D real-time strategy game (any similarities to a certain Ridley Scott movie are no doubt purely unintentional). Its setup has a former marine named Greg D. Callahan exploring a black hole in the 1970s. He’s unable to avoid its general suckiness and is transported into another dimension. There he bumps into a certain cyborg Commander Maximix—not to be confused with Maximus—who, after a battle, captures Callahan and returns him to Myridion for execution, where the royal family is trying to figure out how to succeed the recently vacated throne.

Apparently, they dig those wacky circus games, and with three different rivals for the throne, each picks a gladiator to fight for him in a giant arena, which remarkably resemble 3D real-time strategy maps.

Benoît Rullier of publisher Arxel Tribe





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007: Nightfire

Electronic Arts announced that they've signed Pierce Brosnan to reprise his role and use his likeness as the shaken and stirred but always suave James Bond in its upcoming action game.



Hannibal

From the "never thought you'd see a game based on that" file comes Hannibal Lecter, gangsta Liltech-engine shooter star. Take on the role of Clarice Starling and have a nice Chianti. [Strategy First]



NHL 2003

It's back and better than ever! Or so they say every year. As usual, it's getting frighteningly realistic, visually, and there are the usual gameplay tweaks. [EA Sports]



Lords of the Realm III

Due "sometime" in 2003, this third installment of the medieval strategy series will reprise the original two games' real-time combat and empire building, but with a catapult-load of added 3D pizzazz. [Sierra]

## Survival of the Fittest

It's you and Darwin vs. stupid cyborgs in *Breed*

by Cindy Yans

**Developed** by Brat Designs and expected out late this fall, *Breed* pits you against an aggressive biomechanical race that is infesting the Earth. As a multi-vehicle, mission based game, it equips you with the latest weaponry and a full complement of fighters and ground assault vehicles with which to contest the enemy, as well as a fleet of cruisers that carry an array of accelerated gestation pods, capable of supplying you with a constant flow of ground troops or "grunts." Think a cross between *Clone Wars* and *Aliens*.

As commander Saul Richter of the USC Darwin, the only remaining ship to survive the devastation of *The Breed*, it's up to you to invade the aliens' infrastructure, and take advantage of their apparent lack of intelligence (which is more than compensated for by their viciousness during battle). While tactical in part, this is really an action game in which you accomplish your goals by either deploying heavily armed dropships into *Breed*-controlled territory or, if aboard a suitable vehicle, mounting your attacks by traveling freely between the planet's orbit its surface.



Far from ill-equipped, this soldier is tanked right up to the epaulets.

While you might look at *Breed* and see shadows of *Halo*, at second glance you'll note that the latter has somewhat smaller levels and more highly specific objectives. You can't get away from it, though, as not only are its missiles, drop ship approach, and troop-fighting aspects very similar to *Halo*'s, its two-weapon infantry limit is almost identical. In mission mode, *Breed* has 24 levels, and its 16 player multiplayer mode offers the usual CTF, Deathmatch, and King of the Hill gameplay. And for those of you unfamiliar with the yet-to-be-released-on-PC *Halo*, think *Operation Flashpoint*, *Delta Force* or *Tribes 2*, only with cyborgs. ●



# The war is far from over!

"Solid premise, solid presentation ...The hopes for Sudden Strike 2 are certainly high" **IGN PC**

"With its richly detailed and historically accurate units, the game will appeal to all fans of WWII games" **GameSpy**

## SUDDEN STRIKE

### Features:

- Five powerful campaigns with more than 40 breathtaking missions
- More than 50 new units, with up to 1,000 units per scenario
- Controllable crews can capture and use every motorized vehicle, including: tanks, aircraft and trains
- Fast-paced multiplayer mode with up to eight players

The world is an enormous battlefield, and you're on the front line, in the center of realistic WWII strategic battle action! Command German, Russian, British, American or Japanese troops and fight on water, land and in the air to destroy your enemies and win the war!



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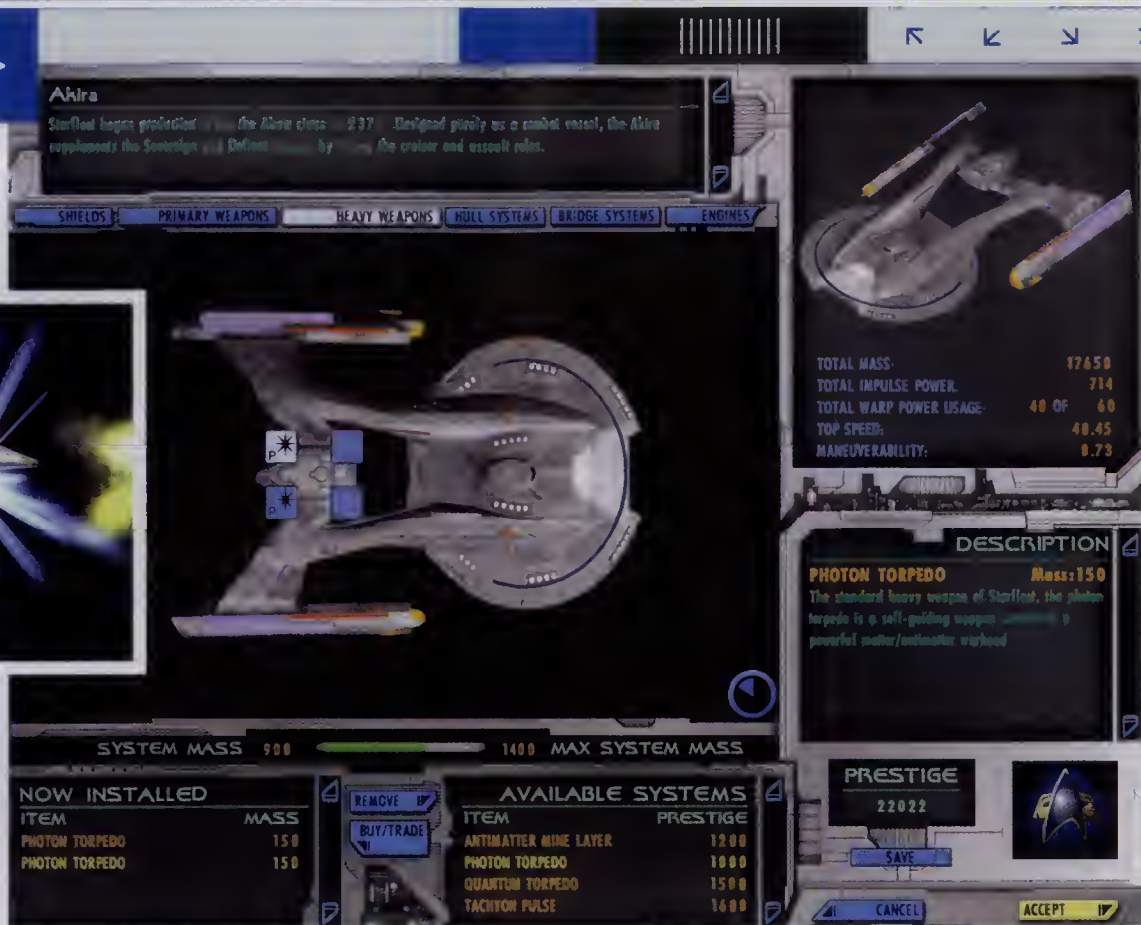
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You can now spend some "prestige" points on customizing your ship. >>> [inset] A Sovereign-class ship fires its quantum torpedoes. You can now have as many launched at once as the fiction allows, not the limits imposed by the boardgame.



## Evolving Trek

With a new publisher, Taldren gives *Starfleet Command III* a coat of polish

by Steve Bauman

It's rare when a game series switches from one publisher to another, but when the *Starfleet Command* series moved from Interplay to Activision, it affected more than a logo on a box. Interplay produces games set in the original classic *Star Trek* universe while Activision handles *Next Generation* and *Voyager*, so the obvious change for *Starfleet Command III* is that it's a *Next Generation* game.

Perhaps more significant, Activision has given developer Taldren more time to work on the game, which in theory, that should make for a more solid game at launch. According to Erik Bethke, the CEO of Taldren, the game was feature complete in June, giving them 5-6 months of time to polish the game for its late-Fall, early-Winter release. Bethke says they're using the extra time to beef up a number of things lacking in the original.

Hurt most by the short development schedules was the ambitious "Dynaverse" multiplayer system. It was supposed to allow users to create servers for

players to have a dynamic *Star Trek* battle experience for dozens of players, but it was horribly broken at launch. It's still ambitious, with plans for players being able to join fleets—with AI-controlled ships as well as human ones—as they battle with and against others for control of the Alpha Quadrant. The version with *Starfleet Command II* was eventually patched to some semblance of a working system, but Bethke admits it's a sore spot for the team. "We need to nail it right [for *Starfleet Command III*]," he says, and that means out of the box it has to work for up to 128 players.

Though Bethke says Taldren originally envisioned the game as more of a multiplayer or skirmish game that mirrored the original *Starfleet Battles* boardgame, the team was surprised to find people clamoring for a better single-player campaign. "We spent far more time building missions for the campaign [in *Starfleet Command III*]," he says as he shows off the new campaign interface and in-game briefings. They developed multiple storylines before finalizing the three that made it into the final game, and they're a linear series of missions involving the Klingons, Romulans and the Federation (the Borg is playable in skirmish and multiplayer). Bethke says they're "more aggressively" using the *Star Trek* universe than they have in the past, and the storylines overlap with events and characters that appear in the upcoming *Star Trek Nemesis* movie (Bethke says there will be no spoilers, as the game is out before the movie).

The core of the game remains the slow-paced, real-time battles between massive starships. When you complete battles, you receive "prestige" points which can be spent on newer, larger ships or, and this is new to the series, to customize your existing one. There are over 25 ships in all, and they can be upgraded with better shields, weapons, and other systems. Taldren has also brought back officers, which are recruited via your prestige and affect the performance of your ship in battle. They gain experience during combat and can "level up" and acquire new skills and bonuses.

While the first two games were evolutions of the boardgame, Bethke says this latest version is taking more liberties, removing some of the "clunkiness" of past efforts. "It's still influenced by *Star Fleet Battles*," he says, "but we're





**REAL-TIME STRATEGY MEETS SQUAD-BASED TACTICS**

# STORMING IN THIS FALL

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OF PACE FROM MOST  
CONVENTIONAL REAL-TIME  
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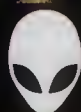
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ALIENWARE







Inquisition

Though it's a rather... interesting setting for a 3D action game, head on back to the 14th century for some oppression at the hands of those inquisitors and beggars (?) while avoiding the plague like the, er, plague. [Strategy First]



Conflict: Desert Storm

Lead a four-man squad of troops from the world's special operations teams in this third-person 3D tactical-action kind of thing. It's the usual mix: 15 missions, real weapons, tactics, stealth, etc. [Gotham Games]



Robin Hood: The Legend of Sherwood

Hang with the merry men of legend in this tactical action game, which sounds like Thief meets Commandos. Control up to five people as you rob, siege, and drink a lot of beer. [Strategy First]



Trade Wars: Dark Millennium

This is the working title of another massively multiplayer combat game, only this one is set in space. There might also be some trading involved. [NCSoft]

now freed from the limitations of the ruleset." Though purists may be tearing up their hex maps in dismay, Bethke says the boardgame itself diverged from the series, and *Starfleet Command III* is now more "realistic" when compared to the actual series. For example, the boardgame overstates the power use of various systems, and the new game manages to both simplify the management and make it more accurate, focusing primarily on weapons and shields.

Overall, the game has a considerably simpler, and slicker, interface. "We took the time to scrutinize each control," says Bethke, and it's obvious when



Battling a Borg cube. Everyone's favorite collective is available only in skirmish and multiplayer. >>> [right] An Intrepid cruises for chicks at the local planet.



actually playing the game. This, along with improving the campaigns and beefing up the role-playing elements, was one of the main objectives for the team, and it appears its successful.

With only minor tactical changes during battles involving cloaking, being able to reverse (fire while moving backward), and warping within a mission (think different stages to a mission a la *Wing Commander*), people who've played either of the originals should feel right at home. New players will get more tutorials, a considerably less complex interface, and less micromanagement of the various systems.

Hardcore fans have a tendency to negatively perceive claims of less complexity and micromanagement as "dumbing down" a simulation. While it's impossible, at this stage of development, to see if those fears are justified, Bethke is confident they've struck the right balance with *Starfleet Command III*. "We kept the spirit, the challenge, and the gameplay," he says, "but we haven't lost any of the depth or complexity." ●



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at how well it **Worked!**"

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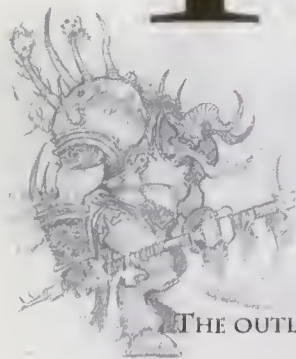
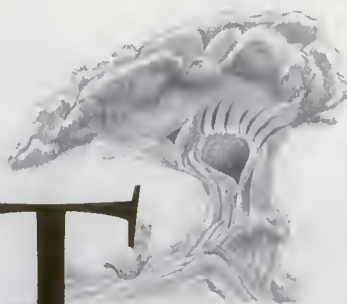
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# THE LATEST MUD RUNNER

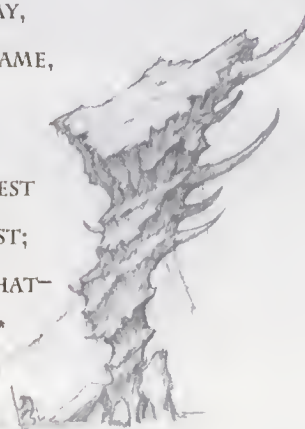
BY CINDY  
YANS



Watch Asheron's Call 2 gallop down the homestretch as it leaves the rest of the second-generation massively multiplayer games somewhere near the clubhouse turn

THE OUTLOOK ISN'T BRILLIANT FOR THE MUDVILLE FOLKS, THEY SAY;  
FROM NINETEEN HUNDRED SEVENTY NINE RIGHT UP UNTIL TODAY,  
WHEN FOLKS SAY "TINY," "UBER," MUDs AND "DIKU" MUDs ARE LAME,  
A SICKLY SILENCE FALLS UPON THE PLAYERS OF THE GAME.

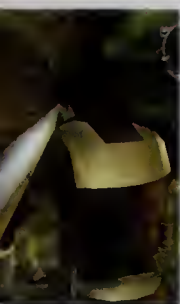
THE STRAGGLERS SWITCHED TO EVERQUEST, OR UO, BUT THE REST  
CLUNG TO THE HOPE THAT SPRINGS ETERNAL IN A GAMER'S BREAST;  
THEY THOUGHT IF ONLY MICROSOFT COULD TAKE A WHACK AT THAT—  
THEY'D PUT UP EVEN MONEY NOW WITH TURBINE AT THE BAT.\*



*\*With huge apologies to Ernest Lawrence Thayer (1863-1940)*







**I**F you were to look back through our online archives, you would see that we posted approximately 52 articles about the original *Asheron's Call*, cementing it as somewhat of a "big deal." Since most of what Microsoft touches tends to turn to gold, players of *EverQuest* and *Ultima Online* were very curious to see what the Gates-keeper would offer to the already established world of persistent online role-playing games. Even to this day, Turbine attributes *EverQuest's* massive success to the fact that it was released a short time prior to *Asheron's Call*. When it's sequel time, though, Turbine cashes in first.

While most would agree that in the original game, at least initially, the graphical textures were dull and bland, the skins lifeless, the monsters monotonous—sure, it is nice to be able to customize your character's face with different mouths, noses, hair styles and col-

ors, but the reality was that the graphics were small enough and fuzzy enough from most camera views that, well, everyone looked alike. Not so any longer.

The most obvious reason for this is that the three races are different this time around. In *Asheron's Call*, there is simply one human race with three variations, each burdened with a weird name. Now, in a bastion of multiculturalism, you can play more divergent types of characters with more tactical impact. Your choices become bigger and more important.

If you want to continue tradition, or if you want to look "pretty," you can play as a Human. Members of the Lugian race are very large, hulking, barbarian-looking creatures, and the Tumeroks are almost aquatic in their structure and physiology. They are certainly more wild and chaotic, and in some ways more "magical." This disparity, in addition to wonderfully improved textures, makes for way more interesting skins.

In the current game, you get a general feeling of emptiness when you look around. Turbine president and CEO Jeff Anderson agrees. "A





lot of it was just rolling terrain," he reminisces. "Oh look, a tree! Oh look, a house! And over here there's a rock! And we wanted to change that. We wanted to bring a huge number of polygons, and a large number of objects, so that when I look around in a forest it's 'tree, tree, tree, rock, rock, tree, rock, tree, tree rock.'" Not only do you now have "rock rock rock tree," you have a landscape more beautiful than anything we've seen released in the genre to date. The high polygon count and all of the effects really provide a sense of "place." It's quite reminiscent of the immersive worlds of *Dungeon Siege* or *Morrowind*.

"When we started laying out the landscapes on the sequel, we broke them up into these three giant continents," says Anderson. "And thematically, we've changed them dramatically." The Lugian areas have a mountainous, Himalayan feel to them, the Tumerok's have much more of a tropical, lush feel, with some carefully placed Extreme Swamps, and the humans inhabit more familiar grassland-y turf. "From the redwood forests, to the gulf stream waters..." Oops. They further broke each of the continents into "sub-playgrounds" of progressing difficulty. Don't dare to call them "zones"—this game is a zone-free zone.

#### AND THEN SOMEONE YELLED, "SCORE!"

In the original game, the sound, like the graphics, was also of a more functional nature than anything else. Everything was "present" and everything was "correct" but nothing showed any real innovation, hence nothing garnered any real enthusiasm. In general, there is little to be said for music and sound in any of the current online role-playing games. And also in general, there is just about nothing more boring (except to a musician) than a discussion of sound design. It's really hard to "ho-hum" the sound and music for this game, though. Creative Director Jason Booth has gone totally overboard in an attempt to bring his background in music to some tangible fruition.

At the risk of using this buzzword twice, "immersion" is what it's all about. In most cases, it seems as though people simply finish a game design and then tack on a score at the end, and in the case of long-term gameplay, we all eventually just turn our speakers off. Booth has created a heavily theatrical sound plot for this game. Every area and situation has a theme attached to it; however, in order to smoothly transition among them, they must, each of them, blend with any sounds or music to or from which they're evolving. For the musical among you, it seems almost as though he's created an *immense*, layered, polyphonic fugue in which the counterpoint evolves as the player moves from place to place or engages in situation after situation.

This is all vital because players will be able to make your own jam sessions. "I've already started

The damage counter has been ramped up so that even a young warrior can hit a rat for 300 points of damage.





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(top) Instruments in the game work just like text emotes, except you hear them—so get ready for some jam 'n' spam.

Group craftsmanship—it's o hot time on the old forge tonight.

hiding chord changes in different areas, and subtle key changes," says Booth. "There will be podiums, which will be special areas with their own key changes for people to hold concerts in. Somebody walks by and sees somebody's playing music [via "audio emotes"], so they pull out an instrument to play music, and they all end up talking, because it's very easy to type while you're playing music, so it ends up being a really interesting social dynamic where it gets people talking to each other where it might not have otherwise. And that's really important."

#### THE GUTS AND THE GLORY

So far, we've only engaged the visceral side. But what about game-play? When the designers polled fans and naysayers alike about just what the fun factor is in these types of games, one of the most significant questions they asked was, "How much time do you actually like playing with other people?" They found that most longtime players really like long-term in-game relationships (which is good, since "glorified chat room" is an often-used moniker for MMORPGs), but many newer players look at it from a slightly different perspective. "What we've heard from them is this," says Anderson. "I enjoy the opportu-

nity to be involved with people on my terms, but I don't want to have to need them." Amen. So in order to give you a more single-player feel, they will introduce a Vault Campaign.

You'll know upon entering the world of Dereth that it has been completely destroyed—not a MacDonald's to be found. Literally from the very beginning of the game, in every playground, you'll find a vault. They are calling these vaults "semi-private." There's a kind of entry foyer that begins them, which is generally public, so people can initially help you through if you like. But then there's a portal beyond which no one can pass more than once. So you go it alone (or with your group). Not only will this device give people more of a solo feel, it will also serve as the non-linear purveyor of the game's story, and will answer the skeptic's ever-present question, "What's the point?"

"We wanted to find a really very intuitive, simple game mechanic that will allow people to understand what they are doing," explains Anderson. "When you start the game, you look at your little vault campaign box, right in the UI, and you can see there are lots of circles that haven't been filled in." Thinking players will realize that they need to find these vaults to learn the story of why the world was shattered. You'll be treated to a Boss battle and a piece of the story with the completion of each vault, and the order in which you tackle them shouldn't matter. Eventually you'll collect all of the menhir stones that the vaults were protecting, and you will find out the point: just what *is* threatening Dereth. And in the expansion pack, you'll have a chance to deal with that threat.

The game's Allegiance structure and kingdom-based player vs. player combat are handled as usual, but you will be able to get to all of the vaults without engaging in any of it, if you wish.

#### COMPLETELY PLAYER-BASED

In the beginning of the game, you'll have some newbie equipment, but until players figure out how to



# YOU'VE BEEN LEFT BEHIND...

The third installment in the Earth 2150 series, *Lost Souls* is a 3D RTS voyage that has you scrambling for resources as you swear revenge on those who left you behind in a world that is set to crumble and vanish. The challenge is to make it out on time. The goal is to make it out alive.

- Three new, extensive campaigns with 30 original, nail biting missions.
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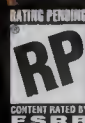
## AND TIME IS TRICKING away.

### EARTH 2150

# LOST SOULS



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[above] Marvelous shadows and water effects abound.  
[below] A lone Tumerak Chieftain contemplates going for a swim.  
One of the game's many and varied indoor locations.

craft items, you'll have no chance to purchase anything else. There are no NPCs in *Asheron's Call 2*, so...no FedEx quests, no shopkeepers... What's up with that? [See a discussion of event-driven NPC-less gaming in this month's "Road to Nowhere" on page 96.]

While some people think that crafting items is especially boring, it really is all related to success in combat. And it's especially important without non-player characters. As always, it's about Who Has the Best Stuff. You can't take crafting materials from a resource unless you "own" the resource. For instance, you can't mine the tree until you own the tree, and the way you own the tree is by killing the monster that actually protects the tree. Once you kill the tree guard (or the ore guard, or whatever), it becomes part of your faction. Then you own that resource, and only your faction—your kingdom, your allegiances—can actually use it. And you need to protect that resource, or others can take it away by killing the respawned guard and its new player allies, for their own side. This creates a kind of turf-war environment, with many opportunities to role-play.

And to stress "player-controlled" even more, the game will allow your actions to have a real effect on the world. The macro-goal of the game is to rebuild the destroyed Dereth. The designers believe that between physically building up the world, and affecting the outcome of Turbine's signature regular "events," you'll notice many more direct consequences of your actions.

#### GALLOP AND STASH AND MAKE MONEY IN YOUR SLEEP

In addition to a much more intuitive interface, there are several new tidbits that many of you have asked for that will make life in Dereth a bit more streamlined. First is the inclusion of mounts. Everyone





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Violence  
Blood





(left) The games macro-goal is to rebuild the world of Dereth, the results of which you will see change over time. OK... Lugion? Or Creature from the Black Lagoon?

hates walking long distances in these games, and mounts (of various species) will make travel a lot easier. Unlike in *EverQuest*, you'll probably be able to gain access to the most basic mounts quite early in the game. You'll be able to choose better mounts as you go up in level and gain resources, and they may even give you combat bonuses, grow with you, and fight along with you.

Next is an "un-trainable skill tree." How many times did you reach level 20 in an online role-playing game and then decide that you've built and trained your character all wrong? Even one time is too many. Here, if you've chosen to train in a skill that you eventually find useless, or even if you just want a change, you can un-train the skill, recover those points, and assign them elsewhere.

You'll also have extra storage space, which they describe as "some sort of banking system" so you don't need to worry about filling up all those inventory slots (although there are no weight restrictions). And finally, there is a consignment vendor system. You can set up a shop (which will take the form of either an avatar or an actual shop) that will sell goods for you while you sleep, or more importantly,

while you have fun fighting monsters or crafting more stuff instead of waiting around for some idiot buyer to find you.

#### WHICH GEN?

Turbine is calling this end-of-year release the first second-generation online role-playing game... but when you look at the MUD and MUSH variety games, *Meridian 59*, *The Realm*, and the like, which generation are we really talking about? Not that it matters. What does matter is that someone get us off the treadmill and into the experience that so many have envisioned but that, so far, no one has achieved.

"I think some of our competitors are going to make second-generation products that are more hemmed in," concludes Anderson. "We really—and I credit Microsoft as well, for giving us the freedom to say 'let's explore the franchise,' but really more than anything, 'let's explore the genre'—we have set out to try and break the paradigms about what a massively multiplayer game is all about... so saying things like, 'why am I bored? Don't bore me. I don't want to be bored' is important."

But who says the neverending level treadmill is boring? Just about everybody, that's who. ●

## THE REST OF THE STORY

What do the rest of the current online games have in store for you this year? It's more online gaming than you can possibly swallow

At one time, the quantity of massively multiplayer games in development seemed on the verge of reaching a number incomprehensible to mortal man, something on the order of the number of stars in the universe or the number of music pirates the RIAA swears are destroying America. And while things have cooled down a bit, you can still count on far more online choices in the year to come than you'll ever be able to play, much less pay for. Which makes the competition for the hearts and minds of gamers all that much more desperate...

While Turbine slaves away at *Asheron's Call 2*, the other players in the massively multiplayer arena are hardly sitting on their hands. "Evolve or else" seems to be the mantra as online game publishers labor to keep existing fans happy and to attract fresh wallets, er, faces to their virtual worlds.

Leading the pack is *EverQuest*, with both a new expansion and a full-fledged sequel in the works. Sony's behemoth has dominated the online role-playing game market since its inception, and despite numerous personnel changes and technological upheavals, is still the one to beat. As turnabout is fair play, this time it will trail Turbine's game to stores by a significant period, leaving its *Planes of Power* expansion to carry the flag until then. The latest expansion adds public mass transit in the form of teleportation gates, which alone may be enough to keep 'Questers a-questing, but one look at the characters and environments in the full-on sequel should be enough to make even the most jaded Troll



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BLOOD  
VIOLENCE

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Shadowknight drool (well, at least more than Trolls already do).

And of course, there's another facelift, er, expansion for the venerable *Ultima Online*. *Age of Shadows*, due in early 2003, should please the architecturally inclined, as its big draw is user-designed housing—*The Sims* move to Britannia?—plus Paladins, Necromancers, and a new continent to rape and pillage. The add-on will extend the use of player-directed scenarios and plot developments introduced with *Blackthorne's Revenge*, one of the best aspects of Origin's online world, but you have to wonder how much more life the grand dame of online games has in her. Will more makeup and a boob job be enough to fend off the challenges of Sony's half-naked wood elves, or Microsoft's gameplay advances? Don't count EA out yet, though; 230,000 hardcore gamers can't be all wrong. No other massively multiplayer role-playing game out there has yet to attract both the hardcore player versus player gamers and the non-combat crafter-types as well as *Ultima Online*, and while recent graphical makeovers haven't exactly made Sony quake in its collective boots, EA's game at least looks solid enough to keep its fans happy for a while. As the company consigned a sequel to the dustbin of history, though, it's only a matter of time before they'll have to decide whether to bail out of fantasy for good, or up the ante.

Then again, keep an eye on comparative newcomer Mythic Entertainment, because *Dark Age of Camelot* is getting a much-needed expansion, and the company is also readying a new game, *Imperator*. The *Shrouded Isles* add-on brings the popular (over 200,000 subscribers) game into a new graphics era with an upgraded graphics engine with DirectX 8 support and adds three new races. Mythic's institutionalized player vs. player combat is one draw of their game; another is its more or less familiar setting, drawing on Norse and Arthurian lore. The new game, still a year or more away, puts a Roman twist on role-playing, in a world where Rome never fell and Nero never fiddled. *Dark Age* is still fairly new to the online world, but already has proven to be a powerful contender. Ironically, though some critics lambasted the game for being too derivative, now other games are starting to imitate many of Mythic's game devices and systems, proving once again that imitation is the sincerest form of plagiarism.

Not enough for you? How about a revamped and re-launched *World War II Online*, with Cornered Rat Studios and Strategy First taking the game in a more shooter-oriented direction? Plagued by perhaps the worst launch in online gaming history, the overly-ambitious



simulation of the battle for France in 1940 seems finally to have overcome its teething troubles; the question remains whether recent improvements are too little, too late [for more, read the updated review on page 76]. In like fashion, Funcom's *Anarchy Online*, still the best online game from Norway, continues to get upgrades and new retail packaging. Also burdened with an abysmal launch and some truly awful early glitches, the science fiction role-playing epic is maturing into a solid and appealing product, with constant updating and tweaking from its obviously dedicated developers. And Nexon's *Shattered Galaxy* continues to roll on, offering real-time strategy for the multiplayer masses, while NC Soft's *Lineage* still claims to be the largest online game in the world, chiefly due to a host of Korean Internet cafes and a horde of often-fanatical followers. Despite the labors of Destinations Games and Richard Garriott, *Lineage* hasn't really caught on in the States, where more graphically satisfying and culturally accessible fare seems to go over better. Nexon, for its part, also continues to run *Dark Ages* and *Nexus: The Kingdom of the Winds*, both online role-playing games the latter of which underwent a version upgrade earlier this year. Like NC Soft, though, the



# US SPECIAL FORCES



## TEAM \* FACTOR

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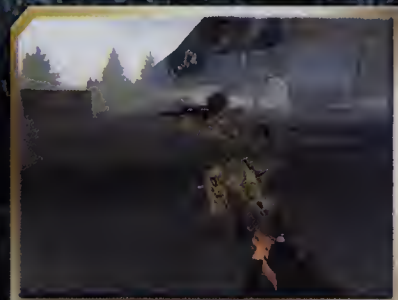


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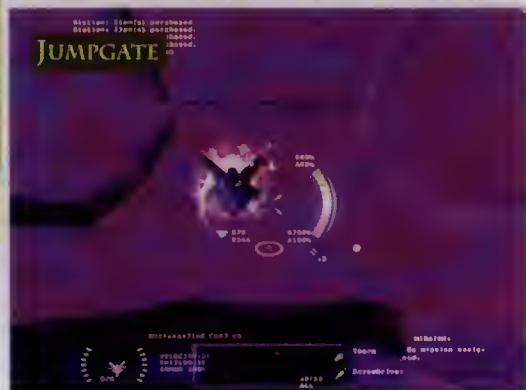




company has had difficulty broadening the appeal of its products beyond its native Korea.

And it doesn't stop there. One of the great things about online gaming is its sheer variety. You think the massively multiplayer experience stops at elves, dwarves and spaceships? Think again. Besides fairly traditional action games like Netdevil's *Jumpgate*, a space pilot-sim that is still plugging along, or old-school text-based fantasy games like Simutronics' *DragonRealms*, you have things like Avaria's *Endless Ages*, a massively multiplayer first-person shooter role-playing game (say that six times fast!) that recently debuted. This ambitious project puts you in a sort of limbo, where everything and everybody that ever lived or died ends up. "The playing field is leveled out," Avaria says of this strange nether region, but the attraction for players might be the loadless first-person environment and the decidedly quirky setting. Or, at the other end of the gaming spectrum, there's StrategyWorld.com's *The Hundred Years War*, one of the earliest commercial massively multiplayer games (it's origins harken back to the long-gone I Dream of 'GEnie' network). It's still text based with some graphical aids and about as deep and detailed as you can imagine. Farming, war, marriage—everything from piety to progeny—is there, and in terms of player interaction it may well be one of the most intense multiplayer experiences available for the more contemplative and literate gamer. Are fourteenth-century kings 'n' things too cerebral for you? EA's *Motor City Online* has slick looking hotrods in addition to a community of racers, and though the first few laps were a bit rough, race fans have reason to cheer, now that the game is getting some much-needed improvements and tweaks. This tip of the hat to *American Graffiti* and the muscle-car era of street racing is beginning to show signs of realizing its once bright promise.

Maybe the weirdest but also most intriguing factoid about online gaming is that text-based massively multiplayer games are still going strong in several corners of the Web. Skotos ([www.skotos.net](http://www.skotos.net)) continues to enthrall socially active gamers with its line of storytelling games like *Castle Marrach* and *Grendel's Revenge*. And Simutronics, which has *GemStone III* and several other titles going in addition to *DragonRealms*, still has a small but devoted cadre of fans paying \$12.95 a month to close their eyes and imagine themselves as great heroes, without the benefit of 3D graphics. The draw? Other people. Even as the latest and greatest online games stress community building, this is what the old generation of text-based games are based on, and in some ways, they continue to do it better than anyone else. Some companies, like Lyra Studios, are trying to capture that text-based feeling in a graphically rich game. Its massively multiplayer role-playing game *Underlight* puts you in the world of Cloudsbreak, a constantly shifting



dimension where you adventure as a dreamer in the realm of...dreams. In addition to an advancement system that revolves more around player interaction than FedEx questing, the game sports a reflex-based combat system that is, if nothing else, something completely different than the standard online role-playing game.

So if it's variety you want, you've come to the right place. It's a bit chaotic, still, but at least it isn't boring. But it's always been this way online. From the origins of online gaming, with games like the original *Neverwinter Nights* on AOL, through the Kesmai, *The Realm*, and the *Meridian 59* years, the genre has always relied on "just wait until next year" promises to assuage its increasingly sophisticated players. Now, a decade or more after its inception, the genre is finally starting to get it right, with variety, technical competency, and gorgeous graphics. Yet, there are still many, many things that aren't quite ready for prime time, and thus, there's plenty to look forward to, as newly formed and existing companies knead the lumps out of what they are calling the latest and greatest Second Coming...uh, make that "Generation."

With all this online gaming, it's a wonder the Internet has room for anything else. Except spam, of course. ●



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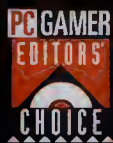
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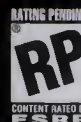
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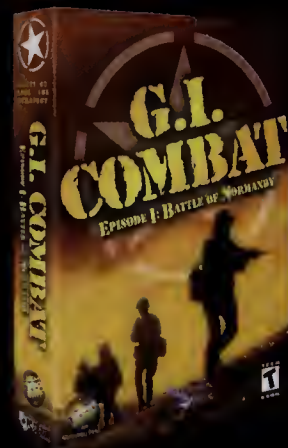
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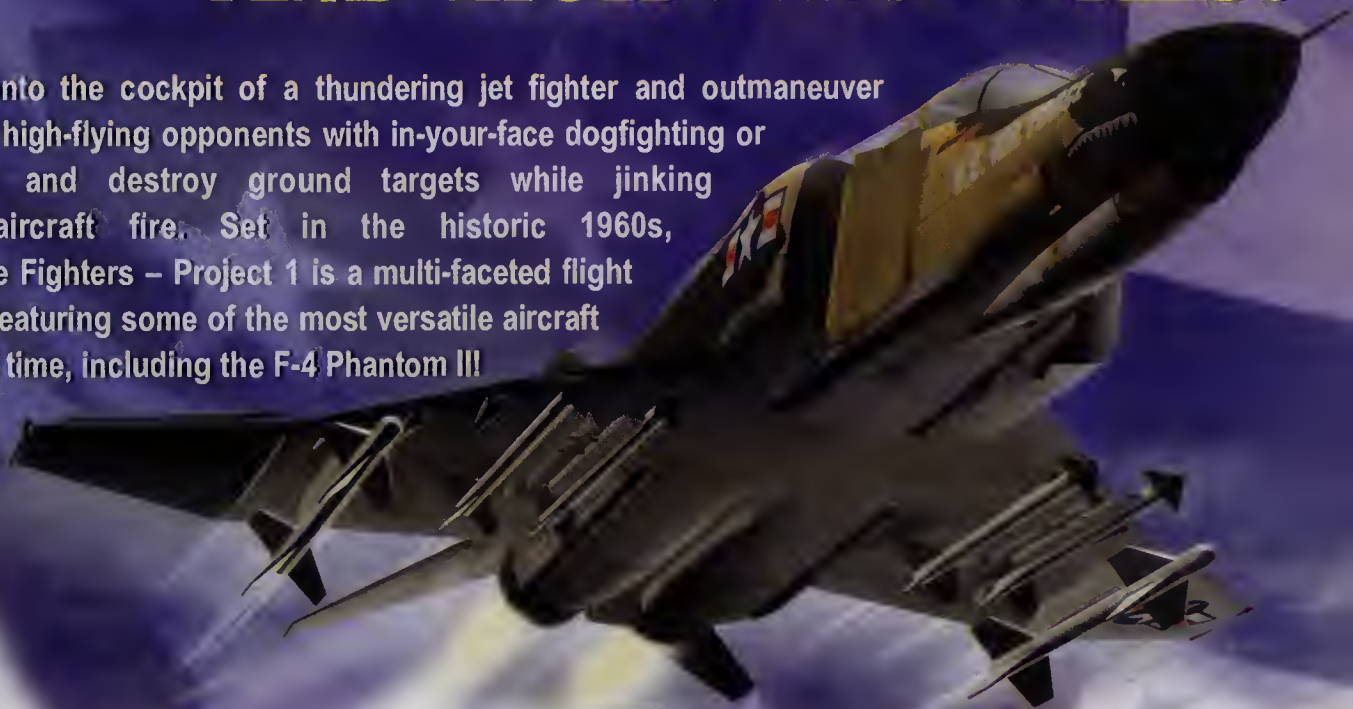
Blood  
Violence





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## TECHNICALITIES

*the human factor*

My kingdom for a game with personality

It seems like PC games have it all these days. Our machines have gobs of memory and the games gobble it right up with detailed textures, loads of animation, booming sound effects, hours of music, you name it. We've got multiplayer for 2-20,000 players, lip-synching, ragdoll physics, Dolby Digital surround sound, and more. But for all the technical and artistic strides games have made, most of them still show a disturbing lack of personality.

Let's take *Max Payne*, for instance. There's a game that was entirely character-driven, pushing you relentlessly forward in a linear plot so important that each level was interrupted by numerous graphic novel panels to illustrate it. Even the game was named after the character. What is Max's personality? I honestly can't say. Judging by the expressions on his face, I would say he's constipated.

Or *Jedi Knight II*. Kyle Katarn couldn't be any more generic if George Lucas had written the part himself. It's maybe unfair to pick on Kyle, since none of the other characters, including the big bad evil Jedi, exhibit any sort of convincing emotion. It's an epidemic common to most of Raven's games: they're well produced, but soulless. Most other PC games with characters are, too. Don't even get me started on *Deus Ex*. Game developers have gotten very good at creating an atmosphere, but not at filling it.

I'm sure they would disagree with me. If I asked Remedy or 3D Realms, they would probably give me a whole laundry list of Max Payne's character traits. Those amount to little more than checkpoints on a marketing sheet when the character itself doesn't actually exhibit those traits. After several years in development, the game's creators are often so close to their projects that they augment what is actually on the screen to with the detailed character persona they've got in their heads. Maybe they can't even see what's missing anymore. Besides, it could be argued that characters who display real personality aren't all that important to making a great game, or at least a top-selling one. *Half-Life* deliberately avoided giving Gordon Freeman so much as a voice in order to drive home the feeling that the game is happening to you, not to him. *Halo* was the best shooter in recent memory and was pretty thin on personality, with the exception of the riotous little grunts and your AI companion, Cortana. Finding exceptions is a cop-out, though. I feel if we're presented with a character, it should actually exhibit personality traits in the game. Cate Archer is quick-witted, has a problem with authority, and has a habit of standing with her weight on one leg. In other games that's just a description, but in *No One Lives Forever*, it's up there on the monitor.

It takes more than conceptualization, though mentally fleshing out characters is obviously an important first step. Making that come through to the players is the result of a lot of hard work. You've got to write lines with personality, which most game developers can't do,

and don't bother contracting good writers who can. Then you need to hire voice talent that can deliver dialogue without making the audience snicker at how bad it is. There's definitely a technological aspect, as facial expression (or at the very least, body language) is key.

Animation probably plays the biggest role in bringing personality to game characters, and it's where most of them fall down. Animators have to get their minds around the idea that they are actors now. It's not enough to make a smooth-looking walking motion, they have to make a walk, and a posture, and other body language that fit the character's personality. Does Lara Croft sit with her legs crossed? Should she? Are they even thinking about this stuff? Some of Blizzard's cut-scenes in *WarCraft III* are especially annoying to me, because for all the stunningly brilliant rendering, people still gesticulate wildly when they talk, waving their arms around in a most unnatural fashion. Over-animating is as bad as over-acting. I shouldn't complain about *WarCraft* too much, though, not when its menu screens display more creativity than most entire games. If game animators really want to take their craft forward, they'll do two things: attend acting school, and have their game animations critiqued by an acting coach instead of other animators.

I'm not saying that every game has to be filled with well-personified characters. Wargamers aren't exactly crying out for more personality in their hex grids. Obviously your *SimCity* and *Civilization* games don't need it. But I wonder what that would look like? What would a *Civilization* game be with a serious injection of personality into every unit, leader, advisor, and interface? And is that the magic ingredient keeping tens of millions of casual computer users from enjoying Sid Meier's brilliance? ●

## TIP OF THE MONTH

**Disable error reporting** – Want to turn off those pesky error reports in Windows XP? Just open up the System Properties (right-click on My Computer and choose "properties" or use the Control Panel), click the Advanced tab, then the Error Reporting button. Just choose the radio button to disable error reporting, and you're set.



send questions to [qa@cgonline.com](mailto:qa@cgonline.com)

**Q** • My husband and I just bought a new Dell computer about three months ago. He is addicted to playing *Medal of Honor* online! The computer came with a Smartmouse with the scroll button in the middle. I wanted to get him a Kensington Turbo Mouse (trackball) so that he could play better. Can the trackball be used with the online game since it doesn't have the scroll button in the center? Do you prefer any one trackball over the other?

Candy T.

**A** • Generally speaking, most people find that trackballs are not as fast or precise as a mouse and therefore not nearly as effective for playing competitive games online. I know one or two people who swear they're better with a trackball, but honestly they're not very good players, so take that with a grain of salt.

If you want a good controller for playing online shooters, I'd recommend Microsoft's latest Intellimouse Explorer, the silver one with the red optical light. Some people prefer Logitech's latest optical mouse, it's really just a matter of which one has a shape you think feels better.

I would stay away from Kensington mice and trackballs. It's been my experience that they're not made very well.

**Q** • The ASUS A7N266-E motherboard—the nForce Steve Bauman upgraded to—has an integrated GeForce 2, according to [Asus.com](http://Asus.com). Integration means it's soldered into the motherboard, right? And if I am, does this mean I'd have to turn it off in the BIOS if I wanted to use a different card?

Ted

**A** • Yes, it does mean that it's "soldered into the motherboard." Actually, it's built into the north bridge (the chip that connects your CPU and other components to your system RAM), but you don't need to do anything special to disable it. When you plug a video card into the AGP slot, it automatically uses that instead of the built-in video.

**Q** • I recently purchased a Dell computer. I looked at Alienware and saw that they charge a lot of money for a PC. I haven't tried them yet and even though I heard they were really good. I don't expect to ever get one. What are you getting that makes these so great? The only difference I saw between them and the Dell I got to replace my old one was a custom grill piece with the Alienware symbol, a lacking case, and a sliding cover that goes over the CD-ROM.

Matt M.

**A** • The boutique and custom-built computer manufacturers, like Alienware, Falcon Northwest, and Voodoo PC, definitely charge a premium over vendors like Dell, Gateway, or Micron. In the case of Alienware, the money is spent on a system that is usually more customizable (you get to pick from a larger list of parts, choose the color, and so on), is built a little more solid, and is tweaked for better performance. These are all relatively minor changes, and for many gamers like yourself, you're just fine buying a high-end Dell or something similar. It should be noted, though, that vendors like Dell sometimes use special versions of hardware (like video or sound cards) built just for them that don't match up to the specs of off-the-shelf hardware. For instance, a moth-

erboard may not have standard power connectors, a video card might run at a lower clock speed, or a sound card might not have as many inputs or outputs. You rarely run into this problem with Alienware or the other custom PC shops. They use regular equipment like what you would buy if you built it yourself. This often makes the systems easier to upgrade yourself.

**Q** • I'm thinking about building my own gaming system and have always wanted a multi-processor box. I will be running Pro Engineer CAD on it as well. As far as multi-processor gaming, does XP Professional allow you to assign programs to a specific processor? Could I have one processor doing all of the operating system stuff and the other processor dedicated to giving me frame rate? If this is possible, what kind of game performance boost would I get (10-15% maybe)?

Tam M.

**A** • Windows XP Pro does indeed let you assign specific processes to run on one processor or the other. I wouldn't look for much of a performance boost from doing this with games, though. On modern processors, the background OS stuff only takes a couple percent of your CPU time, and when you factor in video card performance and the like, it doesn't make much of a difference.

Using two processors would, however, let you leave some programs running in the background without impacting your game performance too much, just give the game its own processor and assign everything else to the other one. If you're going to go that route, make sure you have lots of RAM (a good idea for engineering CAD work anyway).

## TECHBYTES



**nForce2** – A year ago, NVIDIA released the impressive nForce motherboard. It borrowed heavily from the work done on the Xbox, giving AMD owners the same great integrated sound and GeForce2 MX quality graphics (a big step up for integrated graphics). nForce2 takes everything that was good about the graphics giant's first foray into motherboards and improves it. This time around, there are two "north bridge" chips, the IGP and the SPP. They both feature dual 64-bit memory controllers with support for memory from DDR266 to DDR400, which

means an unprecedented 6.4GB/sec of memory bandwidth. These controllers are optimized so that while one is fetching data, the other is preparing to do so, which NVIDIA claims will effectively cut memory latencies in half. The memory access logic and cache is improved over the first nForce as well. The difference between the IGP and the SPP is that the IGP includes integrated video equivalent to a GeForce4 MX 420 that can even support two VGA outputs at once, a first for integrated video. Motherboards using the SPP will be aimed at users that plan to use video cards instead of integrated video. That means you, gamers.

The "south bridge", or Media Communications Processor, is updated as well. It also comes in two varieties: the MCP-T and MCP. Audio hasn't changed at all—both still do 64 3D voices at once. The high-end MCP-T includes not one but two integrated 10/100 Ethernet controllers, one from NVIDIA and one from 3COM, in addition to as many as 6 USB 2.0 ports, 3 Firewire ports, and an UltraATA 133 hard disk controller. The regular MCP is more budget-minded, ditching the 3COM Ethernet and Firewire ports.





low-end oomph, but without as much kick as we'd like from a system in the \$200 price range.

On the right speaker, there's the requisite volume knob, along with a generic "tone" control, which isn't same thing or as welcome as a separate subwoofer volume control. It also includes a headphone jack, microphone input, and line-level input, all of which are appreciated. Such accoutrements don't make up for the fact that, sheer volume aside, the EVSonicXS speakers sound like they should cost \$50 less and look like you picked them up for \$10 at a garage sale. If you're going to blow \$200 on speakers, there are better sounding and far better looking sets out there. —Jason Cross

### EVSonicXS

Telex's first PC speakers should come with a brown paper bag

RATING



Manufacturer Telex [www.evsonicxs.com]  
MSRP \$199

**Telex Computer Audio**, known more for its wide variety of PC headsets and microphones, is trying to crack the tough performance speaker market with the EVSonicXS. The company says it has made speakers for concert professionals, together with Electro-Voice, for over 75 years. While it's hard to believe you could see speakers at a concert in 1927, it's easier to buy that they're a force in the business today: the "EV" logo is easily spotted on the speakers at many live shows.

Unfortunately, that expertise does not directly translate to the PC audio market. This 2.1 system produces reasonable, powerful mid-range sound from the 30-watt satellites, but it gets there by using rather large 4" woofers with an additional 1" cone tweeter for the high end. By necessity, these are surrounded by enclosures that can only be seen as gargantuan in the PC market. At 9.5" tall, 6.5" wide, and almost 5" deep, the satellites are twice the size of most others. This wouldn't be so bad if they looked better but the shape and design looks more like an old PA system than something you'd want sitting next to your monitor. The 60-watt subwoofer delivers reasonable



### Logitech Z-560

Hard to believe they're only \$200

RATING



MANUFACTURER Logitech  
[www.logitech.com] MSRP \$199



Though they've made PC speakers for years now, Logitech isn't exactly



known for its audio products. So it comes as quite a surprise to plug in the delightful Z-560 speaker and find them the best \$200 speakers on the market.

The curious shape of the satellites can only be described as a "slanted egg," but it's quite attractive, and the open sides to the detachable grills are a nice touch. The style is matched in the long control unit, which can be situated horizontally or vertically with the included stand. It has knobs for main volume, bass volume, a fader, a power

## Cambridge SoundWorks MegaWorks 510D

Woefully absent of knobs or jacks

**RATING**



**MANUFACTURER** Cambridge SoundWorks [www.creative.com] **MSRP** \$349

**Creative sells two brands of speakers:** the inexpensive "Inspire" series for casual users and the high-end "Cambridge SoundWorks" series for serious PC audio. The

enough to separate themselves from the pack. The one volume control knob can be placed on any satellite except the center speaker where it would be most useful, and that's the only above-desk control you get. Subwoofer volume is adjusted only through a knob on the back of the sub itself. Likewise, auxiliary input is limited to the back of the sub, and there's no headphone jack at all. You don't even have access to sound level control for the rear speakers or a front/rear fade knob.

The MegaWorks 510D proves that there is more to a great set of PC speakers than great sound. Connectivity and control options are important, and Creative defaulted on all of it. If you're going to pay this kind of money, you have the right to demand a little more. —JC



switch, an "M3D" switch to create faux surround from stereo signals, and a headphone jack. Logitech also gets 23 bonus points for the cool blue light surrounding the volume knob. It's an attractive set of speakers, with not a hard angle in sight, except for the subwoofer.

Sound quality is far better than expected out of a \$200 4.1 setup. Each of the satellites pushes 53 watts and the sub thumps with 188 watts, for a total of 400. The subwoofer delivers decent kick and handles very low frequencies; while it's not quite "thunderous," it definitely gives you the booming explosions you desire. The satellites excel more at mid-range sound than extreme high frequencies, and they're not quite as smooth with music as they are punchy with game sound effects. But this is the sort of nitpicking typically reserved for systems costing considerably more.

It's hard to find much fault in the Z-560s. At \$200, they absolutely embarrass everything else in their price class. —JC

MegaWorks 510D is a new 5.1 speaker set whose \$350 price lands it firmly in the second category. It sounds excellent but doesn't quite have all the accoutrements of other speakers in this class.

The five identical satellites (save for the tiltable base on the center channel) feature a nice matte finish, and each pumps out 70 watts of power. Combined with the 150-watt subwoofer, that totals a seemingly impressive 500 watts. Like most speaker systems, the wattage statistic seems to be pulled from thin air, because while these are very powerful and loud speakers, they don't sound that powerful. Construction feels a little cheap, especially in the case of the lightweight satellites and flimsy volume control knob, but unless you intend to play catch with them, it's really not much of an issue. In general, these babies sound fantastic with games, movies, and music.

The market is full of great-sounding speakers costing over \$300, though. And sadly, the MegaWorks 510D doesn't do

## PlanarMedia 9

You're nothing if your speakers don't look cool

**RATING**



**MANUFACTURER** Monsoon [www.monsoonpower.com] **MSRP** \$99.99

**Speakers are one of the handful of PC parts where looks actually matter.** They sit up there on your desk, often close enough to your monitor to always be in view, and most of us have enough unsightly junk there to begin with. Monsoon's new PlanarMedia 9 speakers definitely have the cool-factor working for them. At less than seven inches tall and about half an inch thick, the metallic-colored flat speakers look great and are the perfect match for a flat panel LCD monitor. Even the subwoofer



# NEEDS

[AND MORE]





PlanarMedia 9 an affordable upgrade in sound and style. —JC

### Klipsch ProMedia 5.1

The sound and the fury and the empty wallet

RATING



MANUFACTURER Klipsch ([www.klipsch.com](http://www.klipsch.com))  
MSRP \$399.99

is small and attractive. A small control puck accompanies the system, and in an improvement over Monsoon's previous PC speakers, they offer not just volume control and a mute button but a bass level knob and a auto-muting headphone jack.

The two 19-watt satellites generally sound about as good as those in Monsoon's more expensive MM-1000 system released a couple years ago. Like other flat speakers, they produce highly directional sound that generally improves sound positioning when you're sitting close to the speakers (as is the case with most PC setups). Very high frequencies don't sound the greatest and it affects music playback a little, but games generally sound great. "Sharp" sounds like gunfire or crackling electricity are reproduced particularly well. The subwoofer with two different 19-watt drivers doesn't have quite enough kick to it, but it's on par with other speakers in this price range.

In fact, as good as this system looks, the price might be its most attractive feature. At \$99, these speakers sound better than most of their competitors and fit well within most gamers' budgets. If you're still using those cheesy "came standard with my Dell" desktop speakers, consider the



Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

For some time now, Klipsch's ProMedia 4.1 speakers have been the benchmark for PC speaker excellence. They look good, they sound amazing, and they have enough controls and plugs to keep

you from sticking your head under your desk to tweak something. Now the reference advances to the ProMedia 5.1.

Aesthetically, they are very similar to other ProMedia products, with the addition of a horizontally situated center channel and a little oblong control unit. This is one of the best control units out there, with a large smoothly rotating main volume knob accompanied by center, rear, and subwoofer volume control with a nice amber digital LED readout. It also has a headphone jack and line input on the side.

The sound quality lives up to Klipsch's legacy in PC audio. The bass is deep and solid, the mid-range horns handle warm tones for music and punchy machine gun fire for games with equal aplomb, and the high end is crisp. These are good enough to hook up in your living room and watch DVDs with on your home entertainment center, though they're calibrated for the more cramped listening conditions of a

PC setup. Granted, most gamers won't be able to tell much of a difference between these speakers and others over \$300—it takes a good sound card and good ears, and most games don't use high-fidelity audio.

Unfortunately, every silver lining is attached to a cloud, and the downside to these wonderful speakers is just what you'd expect: they're expensive. \$400 is a lot to pay for PC speakers, and while they're good enough to last you through two or three PCs and downright cheap next to similar-quality home theater audio products, it's still four Benjamins for a set of speakers that doesn't include a Dolby Digital decoder. But if purchasing the ProMedia 5.1s is within your means, you won't be disappointed. —JC



### The Claw

Easing your FPS pain

RATING



MANUFACTURER Ferraro Design Australia  
([www.claw.com.au](http://www.claw.com.au)) MSRP \$50

It's 3AM. You're dodging through a rain of explosions attempting to complete an important mission for your clan. You are in the groove, shooting and strafing with reckless precision. You approach your goal ready to clinch certain victory when suddenly, pains shoot through your neck and shoulder. A cramp! The enemy closes in as you clumsily grope for the right keys. You've lost your edge. You're fragged.

The keyboard, originally configured to slow typists who were jamming the old mechanical machines, was never meant to be half of a game controller. *The Claw* is a good attempt at providing comfort while maintaining necessary control agility. The device looks like half a glove and is made of rigid plastic. Your hand rests comfortably, settled in a groove for each finger with buttons at each fingertip. The included software





allows you to assign the 10 buttons to a key or key sequence. It will keep track of different key mappings for different games and will apply them based on the game's executable. You can assign buttons to shift, making each of the other buttons perform more than one command, but holding down two buttons at once can be awkward. Setting a button to toggle the shift patterns is a good idea but there is no good way to tell which shift pattern you are using at a given time—rocker switches would be better as this would provide a tactile way to know which shift pattern is enabled.

Button placement favors first-person shooters with two inline buttons for forward and backwards movement and two side-by-side buttons for strafing. Unfortunately, all buttons have the same shape causing some initial confusion, particularly with the cluster of four identical buttons found in the thumb position. These small shortcomings aside, *The Claw* accomplishes its main goal of easing ergonomic stress on the hand, wrist and shoulder during long gaming sessions.

—Brett Berger

### Xtasy 48X CD-RW

A little lesson in “spending more for the box.”

RATING



MANUFACTURER Visiontek ([www.visiontek.com](http://www.visiontek.com))  
MSRP \$149

Visiontek is primarily known for its Xtasy line of NVIDIA-based video cards, though it has expanded its retail presence by selling memory modules. Now it expands even further with retail sales of two CD-RW drives, one topping out at 40X and a blazingly fast 48X drive. The drives are initially only available at Best Buy, but other retailers will follow shortly.

By all accounts, this is a fantastic drive. The 48X CD-R burn speed means you can knock off a 700MB CD-R in three minutes or less. It also reads CDs at 48X and burns rewriteable CDs at 12X. A lot of CD-RW dri-

ves like to claim big “X” numbers but aren’t really that fast in practice. No drive delivers its full rated speed in real-world use, but Visiontek’s 48X unit comes as close as anything we’ve seen. It’s also extremely quick at digital audio extraction and makes short work of those long game installs. It also supports all the necessary fixed and variable packet modes necessary to duplicate almost any CD with the right software.

The problem is, it’s not really a Visiontek drive. A little company called Lite-On took the optical drive world by storm over the last couple years by producing top-notch CD-RW drives that drastically undercut the competition’s prices. The catch is, they’re not available at retail, only to OEMs and mail order houses. Well, the Xtasy 48X CD-

RW is just Lite-On’s LTR-48125W drive with Visiontek’s sticker on it, stuffed in a box and sold at retail. There’s nothing wrong with making a top-notch OEM drive available at retail, but ordering online will land you Lite-On’s drive for about \$100, and Visiontek is charging \$150.

The Xtasy 48X CD-RW is a great drive and well worth \$150, if you simply have to run into a retail store and get something right away. Otherwise, save yourself the big markup and order Lite-On’s drive online. —JC

### X-Arcade

Perfect home arcade control

RATING



MANUFACTURER XGaming ([www.x-arcade.com](http://www.x-arcade.com)) MSRP \$149

There are two types of PC game controllers, those meant for general purpose use, and others designed for a specific task. The demands on the

second category, usually consisting of stuff like flight yokes and precision steering wheels, are generally pretty high. The X-Arcade controller is likewise a single-purpose controller, created solely for those who play arcade games on their PC. You know who you are—you’ve got all the “classic” game collections, and your M.A.M.E. directory is well over a gigabyte.

The unit consists of two actual arcade sticks and a whole slew of arcade buttons, housed in a very solid wood case that won’t slide all over even during those heated fighting game matches. As far as your PC is concerned, it’s a keyboard. Plug it into your PS2 keyboard port and each button or joystick direction represents a different keyboard key. As such, it can be used for virtually any game that accepts keyboard input, though they’re really taking it out of its element. If you don’t like the setup, it’s programmable.

It’s hard not to like a controller that so perfectly duplicates the feel of an arcade controller. If that’s what you’re looking for, look no further. In fact, it’s doubly useful for those who play console games, as the XGAMING company sells adapters for PS2, Dreamcast, GameCube, and Xbox for about \$30 each. Want replacement parts or colored buttons? Just buy them from an arcade supply.

If you’ve tried reliving the glory days of a youth spent in arcades but it never caught on, it’s probably because the on your PC the game somehow didn’t “feel” the way you remember it. The X-Arcade controller gives you that feel, and can even spark a retro-gaming hobby in those who had no interest before. No wonder we’ve “tested” this controller more than any we’ve reviewed in years. —JC






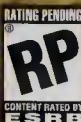
» SOME  
AGENTS HAVE  
A LICENSE  
TO KILL.

» OTHERS  
ARE TOO BUSY  
TO FILE THE  
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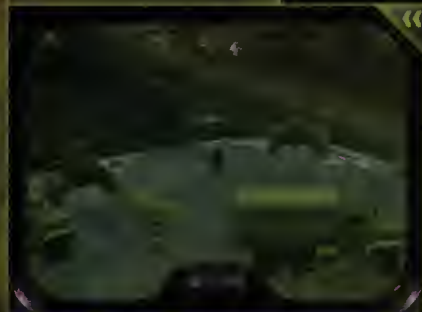
« Employ stealth and espionage or go in with all guns blazing—experience multiple styles of gameplay with high-tech equipment including a ZimoTech™ GPS Map Computer and night vision goggles.

» Take on intense missions in a world-spanning storyline through three massive theatres of combat—Russia, China and the Middle East.



« Choose from a huge armory of 27 authentically reproduced weapons—from basic combat knives and sniper rifles to portable rocket launchers and proximity mines.

» Operate a stability-sensitive weapons targeting system—experience the hostile environment of a battlezone.



« Join forces with up to 16 combatants—objective-based online multiplayer gameplay allows for complex levels of team coordination.

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# Magic: The Gathering Online

## Money for nothing, but the kicks are free

by Robert de los Reyes

**GENRE** Card Game/Money Pit **DEVELOPER** Leaping Lizard Software [www.lplizard.com] **PUBLISHER** Wizards of the Coast [www.wizards.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 333, 64MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** 2-6 players; Internet **ESRB** Teen

***Magic: The Gathering Online*** embodies everything that's right and wrong with computer gaming. It's the second attempt to turn Wizards of the Coast's cardboard cash cow into digital format. The first, from MicroProse, was a mixed bag. Years later, *Magic: The Gathering Online* is digital done right. Although online play is no substitute for the charms of a face-to-face game with friends, the power to summon an opponent any time you crave a match is a spell *Magic* players will be thrilled to add to their decks.

*Magic Online* is, in a sense, two games in one. The visible game consists of the matches you play against human opponents. The game-within-the-game is

building your deck. Here you will discover whether you and the game are friends for life or two ships passing in the night. You cannot participate without buying cards for your deck of spells. These aren't "real" tangible cards, but virtual ones existing only in the game. Signing up for an account entitles you to a \$9.99 credit to use to purchase cards at the *Magic* store. That's enough to let you buy a pre-made deck and hop into a match, but nowhere near enough to provide a satisfying long-term experience. You'll eventually want to buy more cards. The good news is that for less than \$30 of total investment, you can acquire enough cards to make deck-building a challenge and good enough cards to be competitive in the "casual" rooms.

The bad news is that competing at the upper levels means spending more money on even more cards, spending time on trading and learning the minutiae of card value, and/or winning tournaments. The unseemly greed of the whole scheme is somewhat of a turn-off, but it isn't fatal to the enjoyment of the game.

*Magic Online* relies on players to self-rate their skills by giving them the option to play in either the “casual” or “serious” areas. Sometimes you’ll get your butt handed to you by somebody playing a deck full of rare cards in the casual room (the card game equivalent of ganking), but the *Magic* crowd is generally responsible about self-rating. It built a community around face-to-face



Extraordinary ★★★★★ Excellent ★★★★★

Maybe ★★★★★ Mediocre ★★★★★ Contemptible ★★★★★

encounters, and the courtesy required for live games seems to have carried over to the online version.

Deck-building shows off the best and worst of computer gaming. As you purchase cards, they become part of a database that is sortable by any relevant criteria. With the ability to push a button for statistical graphs about the cards in your hand, building a deck is a snap. Also, even if you only have one of a particular card, you can place it in different saved decks without having to rebuild your deck from scratch as you would with "real" cards. On the other hand, and maybe it's just fogginess to say so, but a virtual collection simply doesn't provide the visceral joy of holding the cards in your hands. And, as with e-books, you can't just put your thumb behind a page and flip around the binder pages of cards.

With your deck built, you can move into various game rooms to seek an opponent. *Magic Online* provides not only the traditional one-on-one game but also various multiplayer formats. Online gameplay is a faithful recreation of the live experience with one exception. Playing with a buddy at home you can bend the rules or grant do-overs as you see fit. Online, you're stuck with tournament rules—screw up and learn to live with it. That said, the online game does an outstanding job of prompting your movement through the game phases. Helpful arrows drawn from card to card keep track of what spells are affecting what creatures. Finding an open game is unnecessarily difficult but not a show-stopper. The only true design failure is the audio. It could only be more annoying if it consisted exclusively of a MIDI version of the theme song to *The Jeffersons*. Whoever thought the sounds from the old MicroProse game would provide warm nostalgia was wrong. All in all, however, the game palette is clean, bright and easy to navigate after a few short sessions of practice.

The pricing scheme requires a mental shift that offline *Magic* players should find relatively easy to make. For those new to the game it's a hurdle, but it shouldn't become a barrier. *Magic Online* is an addictive game that's quick to play, easy to learn, delightfully detailed, and almost infinitely replayable. Just let someone else hang on to your credit card.

#### UPSIDE

Helpful prompting, anytime gaming, card database

#### DOWNSIDE

What do you mean I have to buy virtual cards separately?!

#### RATING

★★★★★



Desolation is enough to make you cry



## REVIEWS IN REVIEW

Oh oh, it's other "magic" games

### Blood & Magic

RATING ★★

**OUR WORD** "It's another generic and bland offering, unique mainly in its tedious Golem management scheme. It's possible that there are some folks who are so bored with *Red Alert* and *WarCraft II* that a change of scenery would be welcome, even one as mediocre as this."

### Crusaders of Might and Magic

RATING ★★

**OUR WORD** "[It's] all too short, so it will be quickly forgotten. Throw in some better level design, monsters, a user level editor and some randomness, and it could have been an excellent game with a long life. As it stands now, it's purely average."

### Kingdom O' Magic

RATING ★★★★★

**OUR WORD** "...one of the funniest games you're likely to encounter. Dotted with anachronisms, hyperbole and visual puns, [it's] a journey straight into the absurd."

### Legends of Might and Magic

RATING ★★

**OUR WORD** "The fantasy setting makes the game a curious oddity in the shooter realm, but what else does the game have to offer? Short answer: not much. [It] puts the genre in a new setting but contributes little more in terms of design and quality of play."

### Lords of Magic

RATING ★★

**OUR WORD** "Stock up on diapers, and buy a book on patience (you'll have plenty of time to read it during loading sequences with the patches). If you can survive [its] growing pangs, you'll find a rich, rewarding experience guaranteed to spark many midnight feedings during play."

### Magic & Mayhem

RATING ★★★★★

**OUR WORD** "...one of those rare engaging games that offers a fair amount of complexity, but is still easy enough to jump right into. Players looking for an original twist to the real time strategy genre should spend their hard-earned mana on this one."

### Magic the Gathering

RATING ★★★★★½

**OUR WORD** "Perhaps you could never imagine a card game which didn't have 'Summon Visa' in its repertoire. Or maybe you play weekend tournaments and terrorize children with your Weenie... Horda deck. Whatever your stake in life, this game will entrap you into its lair of wits and wizardry."

### Magic the Gathering Battlemage

RATING ★

**OUR WORD** "One can only fathom where the game would be if the designers had cast 'Circle of Protection: Dumbass' to ward off whoever finalized the design elements that damned it."



**GENRE** Military Action **DEVELOPER** Bohemia Interactive Studio [www.bistudio.com]  
**PUBLISHER** Codemasters [www.codemasters.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium III  
 733, 256MB RAM, 32MB 3D graphics card **MULTIPLAYER** 2-16 players; Internet, LAN  
**ESRB** Teen

The *Resistance* expansion for *Operation Flashpoint* is sadistic. It's the sort of expansion pack that shoves you in the chest and asks if you're man enough to beat it. It's also one that you'll probably never finish because you got too frustrated and gave up.

The biggest addition, literally and figuratively, is the island of Nogovo, which is essentially a gussied up version of the original islands. There are some distinctive locations, like the new city areas and the long tall bridge

full-blown battles with dozens of infantry and vehicles firing at each other. But their AI just isn't up to the task. Controlling your team in the heat of battle was never a strong point of the game, and it's a tactical error to base so much of the expansion pack on this dynamic. Weapons and teammates carry over between missions, so there's even more reason to replay a mission. Thankfully, the game is light on the vehicle-based missions with their wacky bumper car/hovercraft physics. There are a few stealth missions, including one in which you sneak up to a house to watch a cutscene and then sneak away again without firing a single shot. It's as if the cutscene couldn't be bothered to come to you, so you have to go to it.

*Resistance* begins with an interminable introduction sequence that's obviously supposed to be like *Half-Life*, but ends up being its foreign film counterpart: dull, stilted, and far too long. The developers are so enamored of their engine that they feature it prominently in drawn-out cutscenes that tell the story of the Soviet invasion of a quiet little island populated by poorly acted Eastern Europeans. The Soviets are brutal. "They killed Jiri Hodek," one character says when he reports a Soviet attack.

"Jiri Hodek? We played hockey every winter!" laments one of the characters, "No!"

Since this expansion isn't called *Capitulation*, they rise up and fight back. It's like *Red Dawn*, but instead of Patrick Swayze, the hero is a balding ex-commando with bad lip-syncing, an impeccable English accent, and an *Operation Flashpoint* T-shirt that he must have gotten in a time machine since the date is 1985.

Unfortunately, the bulk of the multiplayer community is still playing the original, so it'll take a bit of patience to wait for a *Resistance* game to form up. With limited online activity and such a frustrating single player game, this is essentially an island of fancy new technology that's all dressed up with nowhere to go. You'd do just as well to download some of the excellent player made missions for the original *Operation Flashpoint* and save yourself the aggravation of watching your AI teammates die their thousand deaths.

## Operation Flashpoint: Resistance

Play the missions again and again and again

by Tom Chick



Giving a Russian bomber an explosive lift. >>> [Inset] The precise moment you're most likely to run out of ammo.

you get to blow up. There's a lot more foliage and more varied elevations, so there are more places to take cover in a firefight. The lighting effects are much better, particularly at night now that headlights throw beams rather than vast, out-of-control patches. Framerates are down with these improvements, so lower end computers beware.

Unlike most first-person shooter expansion packs, *Resistance* doesn't add a lot of hardware. There's a nifty new Soviet helicopter, a motorcycle that's more of a scooter, an Uzi with a polite cough, and a bunch of pistols that, for some odd reason, shoot tracers. But these are all peripheral. You might play through the entire campaign without noticing them, mainly because you'll be tearing your hair out as you replay a mission for the hundredth time and you won't

give a damn about the new Glock.

The original *Operation Flashpoint* required a lot of replaying, but this gave you the chance to try different approaches and see the various ways the action might unfold. However, *Resistance* requires replaying because the developers rely too much on the AI. Many of missions feature lots of friendly AI troops attacking lots of enemy AI troops and getting themselves killed as they wander into the line of fire. Since most of the missions begin with your team ridiculously outnumbered, the odds get progressively more absurd as your men die and leave you on your own. The final mission is a laughable variation on this theme as you trek out across the desert to save the island all by yourself. Whew. At least you won't have to fiddle with trying to keep the AI alive.

It's easy to see what the developers were going for. They wanted to elevate the action from skirmishes to

**UPSIDE**

The new island looks better than the old islands

**DOWNSIDE**

Thanks to your dumb teammates, you'll be on the new island forever

**RATING**

★ ★ ★ ★ ★



## Strange Adventures in Infinite Space

RATING



**GENRE** Short Attention-Span Strategy

**DEVELOPER** Digital Eel **PUBLISHER** Cheapass Games **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 350, 32MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** None **ESRB** Not Rated

Cheapass Games publishes a wide variety of board and card games under a curious premise: strip the games down to their



random, but eventually you start to get a feel for what you are likely to encounter based on the star type of your destination system. Even then, chance weighs heavily in your success. You might find a fast star drive early in the game, giving you an enormous advantage. Alternately, you might find a flotilla of aggressive aliens (such as the reptilian Garthans), or an uncharted black hole.

Even the best strategy can lead to a premature death—that is the game's principle flaw. A greater array of difficult choices with clearer risks and rewards would have added a bit more depth to the game... but it gets along



Choosing which star systems to visit—and in what order—is central to a successful strategy. >>> Repaying your loan cuts into your profits at the end of the game, and the late fees are astronomical.

bare essentials and sell them for less than ten bucks. *Strange Adventures in Infinite Space* is their second foray into computer gaming. It costs a little bit more, but the idea is the same. Digital Eel has taken an underused concept—space exploration in the style of the PC classic *Starflight*—and distilled it down into a light romp that you can play in twenty minutes or less.

Twenty minutes of gameplay for \$15 may not sound like much of a bargain; fortunately, it gets better the more you play it. At the start of each adventure, the game randomly generates a map of the Purple Void, a not-so-vast expanse of space peppered with unexplored star systems. You have ten years of game time to visit as many planets as possible and fill your hull with new weapons, useful artifacts, and odd aliens life forms that you can pawn to help offset the considerable cost of the ship that a shady investor has loaned you. You never have enough time to visit all of the star systems on the map, however, and if you are late repaying the loan, you incur heavy penalties that offset your profits (score).

The trick is to choose which systems you want to visit, and in what order. The first few times that you play this will feel a bit

fine without it. *Strange Adventures in Infinite Space* is a light but oddly entertaining gaming hors d'oeuvre... and the price is right.

—Benjamin E. Sones

## Combat Medic: Special Ops

RATING



**GENRE** Medical Shooter **DEVELOPER** Alpine Studios **PUBLISHER** Legacy Interactive **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium III, 128MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** None **ESRB** Teen

*Combat Medic: Special Ops* is a great concept gone horribly wrong. While fragging everything in sight has been an integral part of gaming since *Space Invaders*, few titles have examined the bloody aftermath. In *Combat Medic*, you get to play a Duke Nukem/Hawkeye Pierce hybrid who inflicts grievous harm on the enemy while performing battlefield surgery on his squad mates.

Each of the game's 10 timed missions drops you into a firefight, and your first order of business is to buy yourself time to operate by eliminating nearby hostiles.

Sadly, the "combat" portion of *Combat Medic* is simplistic, boring, and ugly. Using a top-down graphics engine that looks like it was imported from an early 90's console title that fell through a time warp, the game's idea of "fighting" consists entirely of left-clicking on your target and watching the pixelated bullets fly. It's hard to imagine a duller depiction of modern warfare.

The "medic" portion of the game is more interesting, at least at first. Casualties range from simple fractures and flesh wounds to imminently lethal chest punctures and collapsed airways. The designers obviously did their homework, and the realistic treatments, the ticking clock, and some good voice acting by the wounded soldiers produce a genuine sense of urgency. However, the medical bag interface is extremely clumsy, costing you precious time, and after you master the mechanics of treatment, even cricothyroidotomies become rather routine. You won't have time to get bored, though—the entire game can be completed in just a few hours.

Even as a budget title, *Combat Medic* doesn't deliver. It's too short, too dull, and too poorly executed, which is too bad. Somewhere, there's a great game in this concept. Just don't buy this one. —Dave Markell

Hooray! The mission is finally over! >>> You plan to stick that down my throat? Can I get a second opinion? Please?







demand, which means it's easier to move towed guns around, which means the whole combined arms system is finally in effect. Battles now require tactics and teamwork. Aircraft can bomb resources to limit vehicle availability and warships can sail up and down rivers looking for something to shoot at, but considering all the action taking place on land, boats and planes are more of a diversion than anything else.

The graphics engine runs more smoothly and loads

quicker than it did before, but it's still not very attractive. There aren't nearly as many glitches as there used to be, but weird things still happen. A truck vanishes while carrying a load of men and they suddenly find themselves scattered along the road. "I guess we're humping it from here," someone sighs. A German soldier spends fifteen minutes trying to capture an abandoned base because the French flag won't change. "That's a bug," someone finally tells him. Wacky physics cause vehicles to roll, bob, and spin like whirling dervishes. And then there are the occasional hardcore bluescreen crashes. By and



The Rue de Ruined Ville. >>> [inset]  
You are here.

## WWII Online

New and improved and even more finished!

by Tom Chick

**GENRE** Massively Multiplayer WWII Action **DEVELOPER** Cornered Rat [www.corneredrat.com] **PUBLISHER** Strategy First [www.strategyfirst.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium III 800, 512MB RAM, 64MB 3D video card **MULTIPLAYER** Massively Multiplayer **ESRB** Teen

If you accept that massively multiplayer online games are never finished, you still have to grant that some are more finished than others. Released last year, *WWII Online* was easily the least finished MMO ever to stumble onto the shelves before its prime, and the results weren't pretty.

Now Strategy First is re-releasing the updated *WWII Online* as the *Reader's Choice Edition*. Most of the major problems have been fixed, and it's finally in the state it should have been all along. Instead of mobs flinging themselves at each other in random places around Belgium for no particular reason, a system of missions focuses the action. You get promoted based on your participation in successful missions, whether you manned a tank, drove a truck, and just repeatedly threw yourself in front of enemy bullets. This means there's an incentive to participate and do what it takes to see that a mission succeeds. As you're promoted, you get the power to create your own missions. The result is a persistent world in which the flow of the war is determined by the most experienced players leading the way.

A system of resources also limits the vehicles available to participate in any mission. Battles used to consist primarily of tanks, but now you'll have to get in line for an armored vehicle. This means infantry play a key role, which means trucks are constantly in

large, things behave as you'd expect, but *WWII Online* is still occasionally unstable and unpredictable.

It's also still unfriendly to new players. Beyond letting them practice driving around offline, there's not much to ease them into the game. There's a boot camp channel for asking questions (not that there's anyone there to answer them) and a fat online addendum to the manual (which mainly addresses control issues). Newbies will have to power through a lot of discouragement.

Part of its charm and challenge of *WWII Online* is that it's not as clean as the face-to-face combat of shooters like *Day of Defeat* or *Medal of Honor*. It's often chaotic. The defenders have to figure out where the enemy is coming from to keep them at bay while the attackers have to coordinate their effort to bring together as much firepower as they can. It's fascinating watching battles develop, but it's even more fascinating getting swept up in the ebb and flow. There's the powerful sense of nervous tension as you ride a crowded truck to the front and hear the gunfire getting louder. The odd quiet of being separated from your team in a ruined city and creeping around wondering where everyone is. The spectacle of flying low over a battle. The panic when you notice the tank on your left has been hit and you know you're not hidden anymore. The moment when a well-defended base finally falls after you and fifty other guys have been pounding away at it for three hours.

These are things *WWII Online* does like no other game. These are the reasons the community of fans organized the votes needed to win online polls for sim of year. This is why the *Reader's Choice Edition* isn't just a bit of marketing puffery, but is also a testament that sometimes if you stick with a game long enough, it might live up to its unrealized potential.

### UPSIDE

It's working

### DOWNSIDE

It's one year late

### RATING

★ ★ ★ ★ ★



## Britney's Dance Beat

RATING



**GENRE** Umm.... Sports? **DEVELOPER** Hyperspace Cowgirls **PUBLISHER** THQ **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 350, 64MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** None **ESRB** Everyone

**You've seen them:** console and arcade gamers spasmodically twisting and cavorting on fancy controller mats in front of dancing games. On some level it looks like fun, but there isn't a dance mat controller for the PC and, until now, there hasn't been a dancing game either. Leave it to pop's blondest bimbo to remedy half that deficit with a surprise port of her PS2 game.

"Now it's just you and me competing head-to-head. I'm thrilled to be competing with such a great dancer," Britney warbles in one of several inane quotes scattered throughout the game. (It's even worse when she comments on tour locations.) But that's also the rub, something even an 11-year-old girl couldn't quite forgive: "You mean I can't be Britney?"

No, you can't, your pop star dreams are confined to the celebrated role of back-up dancer in this game. You begin by choosing a Dancer. There are four shorthaired girls and three boys, and each plays exactly the same. For gameplay purposes there might as well have been just two choices. There's a series of auditions and concert appearances (they were too lazy to provide crowd noise), a "Free Dance" mode, a section where you can watch the unlockable "behind the scenes" videos of what its like to be Britney, stills, and a very half-assed Britney quiz.

The game shows you and your partner onscreen. Behind them is a Britney video, and on the left arrow key and spacebar commands and combos drift at varying speed toward three boxes. Strike the keys in the right order and your dancer performs the move. That's pretty much the game and it's actually easier than it sounds. Pass the auditions and it's on to the Concerts, pass those and you get to dance with Britney herself. If an adult can



[above] I'm a dancer!  
>>> [left] Dancing with the Diva.

finish all of this in a little over one hour, how long will it take your kids? *Britney's*

*Dance Beat* is just another empty cash-in featuring a disposable pop star. Oops, they did it again. —Andrew S. Bub

## 1st Century After Tsunami 2265

RATING



**GENRE** Anime-styled Shooter **DEVELOPER** Protonic Interactive **PUBLISHER** Got Game Entertainment **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 300, 128MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** None **ESRB** Teen

**The recipe** for a generic Western "anime" shooter: one part dystopian future Tokyo ruled by corporations; two parts Masamune Shirow character designs minus the artistic talent; twenty parts generic shooting and fighting three-dee action.

What about the diverse and unique medium of manga storytelling is so gratuitously misunderstood by Western developers? After *Shogo*, *Oni*, and now the execrable *Tsunami 2265*, you'd think that the sum of anime content was entirely covered by Shirow's opus *Ghost in the Shell*, with perhaps a little *Bubblegum Crisis* thrown in for good luck.

*Tsunami 2265* doesn't even try to be a good game. At best, it's a half-baked cel-shading demo with a few curt lessons from the master swordfighter Miyamoto Musashi ostentatiously interjected in between mind-numbingly dull "action" and "adventure" stages. Whether you're on foot as spiky-haired hero Neon Shima or lycra lingerie

model Naoko Hikari, or tromping around in one of their painfully derivative giant robot suits, it all plays out the same: empty your infinite supply of ammunition into generic enemies while fighting with some of the most clunky controls this side of an actual mech. If you aren't shooting, you're collecting keycards across environments so repetitive even Zen existentialism can't absolve them.

Anime is compelling because it possesses an ineffable sense of animated style and imagination that utilizes its chosen medium to the fullest. *Tsunami 2265* offers none of this—the entire game is utterly lacking in any sort of visual flair. The point of cel-shading is to dupe the player into believing he or she's playing a cartoon; *Tsunami's* amateurish engine dupes the player into thinking that "anime style" is only a gimmick used to foist crappy games on clueless fanboys.

Mix all components into one CD-ROM's worth of space and let it rot on the store shelves. Serves exactly one star's worth of entertainment. —Douglas L. Erickson

The Japanese ward for "canyan" is "keikaku." The Japanese ward for "mental fatigue" is "kidzokare." Congratulations! You now have a review of this game in Japanese.







Blood is a big part of Hooligans.

## Hooligans: Storm Over Europe

RATING



**GENRE** Real-Time Strategy **DEVELOPER** The Thirteenth Production **PUBLISHER** Hip Interactive  
**REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 300, 64 MB RAM  
**MULTIPLAYER** None **ESRB** Mature

Soccer's dark side is on display in *Hooligans: Storm Over Europe*, a real-time strategy game that's more about boozing and brawling than the world's most popular sport. The first release from Dutch developer The Thirteenth Production caused no shortage of controversy when it first hit European stores last winter, but unlike similar titles seemingly designed solely to attract media attention, there's a pretty good game beneath the oft-loathsome surface. It might not be *Red Alert* with beer and speed, but it certainly isn't *Postal*, either.

The gameplay is similar to that in the *Commandos* series. The single-player campaign takes you through scenarios based in urban centers across Europe. You take control of a group (called a firm) of hooligans made up from six unit types. Each is rated in categories that determine its fighting capability and ability to hold its booze, and each also has a specific skill not shared by the others. Violence is the cornerstone of everything that happens in *Hooligans*. The only way to gain the cash you need to hire new firm members at the local pub—and keep them happy with pistols, Molotov cocktails, beer, drugs, and the services of prostitutes—is by looting businesses.

Objectives in each scenario range from garden-variety goals like getting to the stadi-

um by match time to destroying a rival firm's drug lab and robbing a bank. Enemy firms, cops, and riot squads are always in your way. However, the puzzle-like map construction ensures that you can't bludgeon your way to the finish line. Every level requires exploration and experimentation, and most are extremely tough and require careful use of resources. There are nicely varied multiplayer modes,

including a Capture the Flag variant called Hold the Cup.

The only serious problem is that *Hooligans* doesn't balance its violence with humor. Although much of the game clearly isn't meant to be taken seriously, it blurs the lines by setting up each scenario with video interviews from a phony documentary. The actors are entirely believable in their roles, meaning that it often feels like you're re-enacting real crimes. So even though there are many good points here, you'll have to set aside some of your own morality to enjoy them. —Brett Todd

## Airborne Assault

RATING



**GENRE** Wargame  
**DEVELOPER** Panther Games  
**PUBLISHER** Battlefront.com  
**REQUIREMENTS** Pentium 366, 64MB RAM  
**MULTIPLAYER** 2 Players; Internet, LAN **ESRB** Not rated

**Focused on the** hectic fight for the bridge at Arnhem (the infamous "bridge too far" of World War II's Operation Market Garden), *Airborne Assault: Red Devils Over Arnhem* isn't vast in scope, at least compared to many grand tactical or "operational" wargames these days. It has a map that's only about 30 km by 30 km, and at the very most a few hundred units. Running in "continuous time" (albeit pause-able at any point for unhurried order entry) and with free-form unit placement (no hexagonal movement grids), it'd be easy to write it off as just a real-time wargame, but doing so would cause you to

miss out on a lot of game.

What's amazing about *Airborne Assault* is its style of play. While you can issue orders to all the individual units if you really want to, you can also issue orders to your sub-ordinate headquarters units, and have them very, very smartly organize their units to carry out whatever task you assigned the parent HQ. Yes, folks, developer Panther Games has finally delivered a friendly AI worthy of the term "intelligence." There's no more counter pushing, if you don't want to. You can instead assume the role of a commander setting the overall plan, tweaking things as needed and making the critical decisions when they come up, but letting the computer do all the drudge work. And yes, the AI is fully up to being a strong opponent as well.

This feature alone would be worth the price, but there's plenty more: a 240+ page printed manual that's one of the best you've ever seen, a scenario editor, an intuitive



At first glance, spilled spaghetti; upon closer examination a three-pronged assault aimed at the Arnhem highway bridge... all organized and planned by AI subordinates.

user interface and attractive graphics, and a very stable initial release. Negatives? Sure, a few, most of which the designers themselves discovered: some combat/movement design issues, a few minor non-critical bugs, a possibility of sluggish performance in the largest scenarios, and the aforementioned limited scope of the Arnhem battle. But these all pale in comparison to the overall whole of the design.

If it's going to be 12 years between your company's first computer wargame (*Red Brigade*) and its second, you'd better put out a whopper. Luckily for wargamers, that's just what Panther Games has done with *Airborne Assault*. —Scott Udell



## F1 2002

## RATING



GENRE Racing Simulation

DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER EA Sports

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 128 MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Everyone

After spending nearly three years playing catch-up with Geoff Crammond's acclaimed *Grand Prix* games, EA Sports can finally lay claim to the Formula One racing simulation crown. *F1 2002*, the fourth release in the series since its 2000 inception, takes the genre to new heights of both realism and presentation.

*F1 2002* succeeds because it is both a driving game for everyman and a challenge for seasoned gearheads. You can customize everything about the game, from a raft of driving assist options to the

camp. The former includes some of the prettiest visuals to grace a driving sim. Cars, tracks, and the surrounding environs are depicted with exacting attention to detail, whether the subject is the urban death-trap in Monaco or rough-and-ready Montreal. The latter is best represented by the ability to play through the entire 2002 F1 championship season as it takes place, with all of the authentic racing teams and tracks updated for this year, and a detailed strategy component that allows you to track your vehicle's performance with a telemetry system.

Aside from the disgruntled few unhappy with having to upgrade to *F1 2002* just six months after the release of its predecessor, this game is a must for anyone with even a remote interest in Formula One sims. —Brett Todd

## The Watchmaker

## RATING



GENRE Action DEVELOPER In Utero

PUBLISHER Ubisoft REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 400, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Teen

Adventure games have taken a giant leap backwards with *The Watchmaker*, a poorly translated Italian import that makes a rather feeble attempt to look like a first-person shooter but plays like a lame Gabriel Knight rip-off. You control either Darrel Boone or Victoria Conroy as they try to solve the mystery of a pendulum that zaps people with immortal energy. Switching between players is quite arbitrary and, fortunately, not as scripted as *Schizm*, where plot points determined which player held center stage.

What makes the game so irritating is that the flat gameworld textures are laughably dull. While recent screen flippers such as *Road to India* were not rendered in 3D, at least the backgrounds were interesting. In *The Watchmaker*, the only thing that compels you to keep directing your main character into the next room is some sublime puzzle with various knobs and switches that must be manipulated until the next low-polygon room is unlocked. Even the original *Doom* had better graphics.

Gameplay is about as standard as it gets.



[top] One of the most highly textured locations still has a flat, dull appearance. >>> A sudden plot twist — time to stand around and dialogue about it.



Authentic driver controls add to the realism.

acuity of the AI drivers. Newbies can hop into the cockpit and immediately compete thanks to these features, which act as ersatz tutorials showing how and when to slow down, how to enter sharp turns, and so on. Of course, these options can be turned around. Switch off all of the assists and your reward will be a simulation of F1 racing that boasts a rigorous physics model, computer drivers that are aggressive yet still smart enough to avoid collisions whenever possible, and dynamic weather that adds a touch of the real world to every event.

The presentation values and numerous gameplay options are sure to please both

Collect objects, use them on other objects, talk your way through boring conversations as you obtain subtle clues about the generic storyline. Listen as game characters drone on and on about their completely irrelevant lives. While the voice acting was obviously dubbed in for the US release, it's enough to make you wish for the tomb-like desolation of *Myst*. Just when things get interesting and the story shows signs of life, especially during dimly lit sequences in the mansion, the sound cuts out and the puzzles get even dumber.

If adventure games are ever going to attract a larger audience, the background graphics will have to be just as good as the latest *Unreal*, the story will have to improve to the level of a published novel, and collecting objects and solving puzzles will have to become revolutionized into something much more innovative (or dropped altogether). *The Watchmaker* is stuck in the dark ages of computer gaming where it belongs. —John Brandon





[top] Getting a little air. >>> [below] Up close, the players still look a wee bit "odd".



## 2002 FIFA World Cup

RATING



GENRE Arcade Sports

DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER EA Sports

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 266, 32MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER 2-8 players; Internet, LAN,

Modem **ESRB** Everyone

You have to hand it to the folks at EA Sports; they could sell ice to an Inuit. With *FIFA 2002* only a mere six months old, here's another version, this one focusing on the 2002 World Cup. We knew this was coming, actually, as *FIFA 2002* allowed you to only qualify for the World Cup and not actually play in it. Well, now you can, after shelling out another \$40.

This latest edition features Friendly matches and the World Cup, and that's it. There's no season play, custom tournaments or anything of that nature. To be fair, this is a better game on the pitch than the six-month-old dinosaur we saw in November. The graphics are stellar and the audio is arguably the best in any sports game to date. The crowd roars madly on a goal, and moans on a near miss. The game does a wonderful job

of making you feel like you're watching an electrifying sporting event. The play-by-play remains the best in the industry.

There are other tweaks such as listing star players with a "star" icon over their heads, thus making them easily identifiable. There's also a lot more pushing and shoving for loose balls, and players lose their balance and stumble on occasion. A new "Air Play" model makes it a bit easier to deliver scissor kicks and headers with a touch of a button.

Some of the old problems remain such as the CPU players possessing an uncanny knack for stealing the ball away from even the best players in the world without as much as breaking stride. The computer opponent still refuses to sub out tired players and statistical tracking remains weak.

If you already own *FIFA 2002* and aren't interested in simply playing the 2002 World Cup, then there's no reason to pick up this game, but if you need a World Cup fix with a few new gameplay wrinkles tossed in, this fits the bill. —William Abner

## PureSim Baseball

RATING



GENRE Stat-filled Baseball

DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER Shaun Sullivan

[www.puresim.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium

300, 64MB RAM MULTIPLEPLAY-

ER None **ESRB** Everyone

The text-based baseball market is highly saturated. Popular games such as *Out of the Park*, *Diamond Mind*, and *Baseball Mogul* dominate the genre. Developer Shaun Sullivan has tossed his hat into this crowded ring with *PureSim Baseball*, and for a first edition game it shows an enormous amount of potential.

The game is aptly named as you do not manage your team on the field, instead you play the role of GM/owner, overseeing your team finances and personnel—as

with *Baseball Mogul*, you simply sim your games. However, there are several managerial tendencies that you can use to shape your virtual skipper.

There are no Major League licenses, so your dealing solely with fictional players and teams, but even so the game is littered with stats, options, and small details that add a ton of flavor to your league. The newspaper feature, which is present in many games today, is extremely well done, providing small tidbits not seen in other titles.

The game's failing is actually not game-play related. Sure, there are bugs here and there and the occasional AI glitch (compounded by the fact that you can't force your manager to pinch-hit for your pitcher), but the biggest issue is that it runs agonizingly slow. Simulating a full season on a Pentium III 800 with takes well over two hours. Almost anything you do initiates the "loading" prompt, even something as basic as sorting player attribute columns. It becomes so tedious that a lot of the good stuff is blotted out due to the "sit and wait" syndrome that plagues the program.

Sullivan is highly receptive to user feedback, and best of all he's offering a fully featured 10-day trial period, so if you're a text fan there's no reason not to at least give it a shot, but unless you are running a beefy machine, sticking with it over the course of several seasons is a real chore. —WA

*PureSim Baseball* is only available online at [www.puresim.com](http://www.puresim.com)

Here's a look at the Columbus Glory roster, listed by position.

Organization Roster									
Total Position: 14 Total Pitchers: 11									
<div> <div>Center Fielders</div> <div>Right Fielders</div> <div>Left Fielders</div> <div>Shortstops</div> <div>Second Baseman</div> <div>First Baseman</div> <div>Pitchers</div> <div>Third Baseman</div> <div>Catchers</div> </div>									
Close Roster									





## Pac-Man All-Stars

RATING



**GENRE** Retro-action **DEVELOPER** Creature Labs  
**PUBLISHER** Infogrames **REQUIREMENTS**  
 Pentium II 266, 32MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** 2-4  
 players, LAN **ESRB** Everyone

After sucking all the fun out of *Ms. Pac-Man* with *Quest for the Golden Maze*, Infogrames continues its assault on the memories of old-school gamers with *Pac-Man All-Stars*, another insipid pseudo-retro effort. You're trying to save the queen of Pac-Land by avoiding ghosts and consuming many suspiciously drug-like pellets—don't laugh, the box doesn't say "...They Can't Wipe The Smiles Off Their Faces" because they're happy. Or in a good game.

Unlike the other dozen or more *Pac-Man* games, excepting the wonderfully weird *Pac-Land* of course, you're not restricted to a maze. Instead, you wander around semi-3D, non-scrolling areas where you watch the computer-controlled Pac-denizens get hung up on the environment while you battle slow-to-respond controls. Flowers pop up, you grab them, pellets spill all over, you grab them, you get points, repeat. That's actually moderately fun, in a *Pac-Man*-y sort of way, but you compete against four other *Pac*-Characters—*Pac-Man*, *Ms. Pac-Man*, *Professor Pac-Man*, and *Pac-Man Junior*—who all look alike, so when you're at the default camera view it's practically impossible to tell who you are. This just adds to the chaotic "I need to randomly move in place and something might happen" charm. And where are the lovingly crafted modern-retro sound effects? It doesn't

Every AI-controlled character can get hung up in multiple places on this level.

sound enough like *Pac-Man*, though it gets extra points for the Theremin sounds on the music track on the castle levels. You can never have enough Theremin.

There's a way to remake *Pac-Man* for the 21st century, but it probably

involves realistic weapons, graphic violence, stealth, full frontal nudity, and/or Nazi zombies. At a minimum, it might require some "thinking outside the maze" and solid gameplay mechanics, neither of which are evident here. —Steve Bauman

## Operation Blockade

RATING



**GENRE** Mowing People Down  
 Simulation **DEVELOPER**  
 Professor Fog's Workshop  
**PUBLISHER** Infogrames  
**REQUIREMENTS**  
 Pentium II 350,  
 128MB RAM  
**MULTIPLAYER** 2  
 players; Internet,  
 LAN **ESRB** Teen

From time to time, the simple pleasures of classic arcade games provide a welcome respite from the complexities of modern gaming. In other words, it's occasionally just fun to blow stuff up a la *Operation Wolf*, *Contra*, or the 10,000 horizontal scrolling shooters.

For that reason alone, a game like *Operation Blockade* has some appeal. It's basically a shooting gallery game, where you're assigned to an artillery placement in

some alternate WWII setting and tasked with disrupting the enemy's supply by shooting stuff. Lots of stuff.

Access did this years ago for the Atari 800 and the Commodore 64 with *Beach Head*, and a *Beach Head 2000* was released a while back to near unanimous revulsion, but for some inexplicable reason, it works. It's viscerally fun, it actually looks and sounds pretty good, and in 15 minute spurts, it's as entertaining as many 3D shooters.

It's also as repetitive, minus the changing environment of a *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*. In this case, it's literally the same level repeated dozens of times as you progress across the map of "Saruvia." You get a few changing objectives (kill X planes or cargo ships, destroy an, er, destroyer), but once you've played it a bit, you've exhausted most of the visual variety. (Some new ships and planes appear on later levels.) But it's still pretty fun to just shoot lots of stuff and see it explode.

While there's little doubt it would be improved by environments that are more diverse, more varying gameplay, and perhaps the addition of zombies, *Operation Blockade* is surprisingly appealing in that retro sort of way. —SB



Same of the carnage is pretty impressive. >>> [inset] Got it! Ships came apart in a rather spectacular fashion.

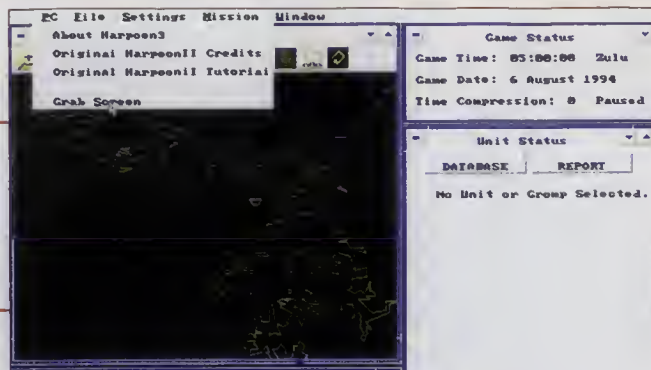


# Harpoon 3

New shakes for an old salt

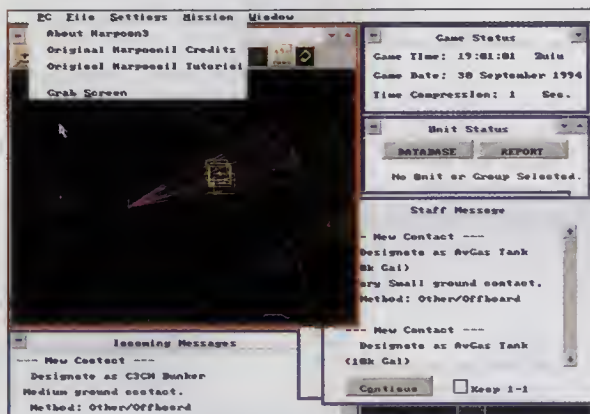
by Bill Hiles

**GENRE** Naval Wargame **DEVELOPER** Spearsoft ([www.harpoon3.com](http://www.harpoon3.com))  
**PUBLISHER** AGSI/Naval Warfare Simulations ([www.navalwarfare.net](http://www.navalwarfare.net))  
**REQUIREMENTS** 486DX2-50, 32MB **MULTIPLAYER** None **ESRB** Not rated



Back in the "Golden" era of gaming, the late 80's, Three-Sixty Pacific came out with a "little" naval simulation based on a miniatures game by Larry Bond, co-author with Tom Clancy of *Red Storm Rising*, and author of a host of his own techno-thrillers. It soon captured the imagination of a handful of hardcore computer gamers as well as the U.S. Navy. *Harpoon* sought to bring the intricacies of modern naval combat to the armchair admiral by using displays similar to those found on real warships. By today's standards, the game looks almost nostalgic in a "DOS, we hardly knew ye" kind of way. The true heart of the game was in its Angola Basin of databases and platform modeling—if the various navies of the

world had it in their inventory, *Harpoon* probably modeled it. Here was a simulation that placed every naval grognard in a Combat Information Center (CIC) of their very own with scenarios and campaigns (battlesets) that covered a wide variety of conflicts and geopolitical flash-points. And as



(top) The opening shots of another Korean War. >>> Things are heating up.

*Harpoon*, the game and concept, grew in the playing, newer incarnations surfaced, offering refinements, bug squashes, and extra battlesets. Compatibility with that new OS kid on the block, Windows, became inevitable and it brought with it the transformation of *Harpoon* into *Harpoon Classic* and then various variants of *Harpoon II*. *Harpoon 97* brought the classic simulation to Windows 95 (though it suffered from some major bugs) and the soon-to-be-released Larry Bond's *Harpoon IV* is slated to bring the classic up to a current catchy eye-candy 3D and true Windows friendly status.

Somewhere in the midst of all this, one of the original Three-Sixty developers, Jesse Spears, was hunched over his computer, fast at work on creating his version of a "Director's Cut" of *Harpoon II*. Logically entitled *Harpoon 3*, it was (and is) a labor of love, and also a seemingly never-ending pursuit of naval combat simulation perfection. Released first for the Mac, *Harpoon 3* is more than just a new coat of paint and a slap on the rear; *Harpoon 3* is the on-going resurrection of a classic and it includes every battleset ever made for *Harpoon II*: the three Global Conflicts, two Regional Conflicts, WestPac and ColdWar. And just as with any *Harpoon* game, it's difficult to recommend it to anyone but a *Harpoon* devotee. It's a very acquired taste that, in the wrong hands,

could do more damage than good.

The game looks more utilitarian than anything (or "that's butt ugly" as a younger gamer said upon seeing the game) with its plain vanilla Windows menus, vector graphics, Mac-ish buttons, and innumerable pop-up windows. It's a '65 Chevy Impala sitting next to a Dodge Viper... but crank open the hood and you'll see that *Harpoon 3* has a monster of an engine. The true beauty of this beast lies in the vast amount of information contained in its database and how it's integrated into gameplay. *Harpoon 3* takes *Harpoon 2* and simply makes it play better. Improved databases. Fewer bugs. Easier interface. It's sea-hog heaven for the genuine naval combat enthusiast. Elevation factors for radar, real world weapons performance, sea states, thermal variations, the list goes on and on as nearly every variable concerning platforms and capabilities is brought into play. And it plays well once the learning curve (huge for newbies but rather comfy for veterans) is passed. There are tutorials that help and a large manual in pdf format (a paper manual would have been nice but alas...) but again, those new to the game are going to be at sea for quite a while. When things get hairy and your computer aides start throwing up contact window after contact window, when missiles and torpedoes are flying left and right, it's both exhilarating and frustrating. A hint: fleet formation is critical; learn to use the formation editor well.

Despite the clunky feeling of its somewhat intuitive interface, and a multitude of data to digest, *Harpoon 3* shines as the ultimate in modern naval combat simulation. Deadly cat and mouse duels between surface ships and subs, airborne threats...to paraphrase Patton: "All my life I've wanted to lead a lot of men in a desperate battle." *Harpoon 3* gives you that chance with all of its complexities and drama. If you loved the *Harpoon* series, this is a no-brainer. Welcome back, old salt.

*Harpoon 3* is available direct only from Naval Warfare Simulations, [www.navalwarfare.net](http://www.navalwarfare.net).

## UPSIDE

Still the king of modern naval warfare, with depth, longevity and a legendary pedigree

## DOWNSIDE

Still interesting and accessible only to the hardest of hardcore war gamers; looks and feels antiquated

## RATING

★★★★★



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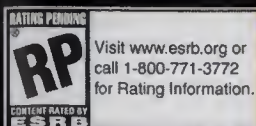
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humanity where days are filled with the  
madness of trench warfare, where soldiers  
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The Face Of War Changes  
October 2002



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# of the

## mod glut

Are gamers overwhelmed with choices?

Has the mod scene gotten too big, too fast? In the past six months, I've gone from searching for four or five good mods to showcase on the Mods & Ends page to wracking my brain over the best candidates in a shortlist more than a dozen names long. And just getting to the shortlist stage involves some pretty strenuous mouse-clicking. Culling the wheat from the chaff is often pretty easy—hmm, *Day of Defeat 3.0* or the latest Incredible Hulk skin for *Freedom Force*?—although it is always time consuming. I spend more time surfing for mods than I do eating hot dinners, though by the look of me these days you'd never know it.

I can't imagine how overwhelming all of this must be to most gamers. How does the average person react to what's available for *Neverwinter Nights*? Or *Unreal Tournament*, which seemingly boasts a user-designed tweak for every pixel in the game? Even titles geared for a casual audi-

■ Many have become the digital equivalent of flies in amber, as relevant to 2002 as the Spice Girls. ■

ence have been affected by this mod glut. Sports games like *High Heat Major League Baseball 2003* and *NHL 2002* are the focus of hundreds of files dedicated to everything from old-time rosters to arena art and sound tweaks. Making matters even worse are the incomplete projects strewn across the net. Many have become the digital equivalent of flies in amber, as relevant to 2002 as the Spice Girls.

All of this has made a great big mess. Unless someone sends you a link, you've got to commit hours to searching for and trying out mods, maps, and other add-ons for your favorite games. God help you if you're still on a dial-up connection. But even if you're cruising with a T1, you'll still waste a lot of precious time that could have been spent actually playing a game. As much as I love mods, if a friend came to me tomorrow and asked about user-made extras for something like *Morrowind*, I'd tell him to either replay the game or move on to something else. That's no slight against the game, or the hundreds of fine plug-ins out there—but where do you even start when there's so much to choose from?

It shouldn't be necessary to ask that question. Yet it is, because both mod designers and downloadees are being shortchanged by the current system, which resembles a smorgasbord catered by a lunatic. While there

may be a lot on the table, you have to adopt a "taste and see" approach to determine what's palatable and what's not. And just as nobody's got the time to eat meals this way, nobody's got the time to select game mods in this fashion.

The only way out of this predicament is proper organization, and that has to be provided by game publishers. Right now, things are spread all over the place, and there's usually no way to tell what's good and what's bad. Just as so many publishers and developers are currently making their games with the modding community in mind, they should also be planning to support that community online. Every game with aspirations of building user support has to be bolstered by an official web site that keeps players informed about what's going on. It should be the hub of all online activity related to the game in question, the first place to turn when you're looking to download a mod, read user reviews of mods, or just catch up on what's new.

Eventually, I think that we'll get to this point. Companies are already starting to provide users with added tutorials, software development kits, and online forums where people can swap tips. Things are much better than they were a year ago, when I wrote about a lack of bandwidth forcing people to use private services such as GameSpy. For an example of how things are beginning to change, visit the official *Neverwinter Nights* site and take a look at what Bioware is giving its customers. Unfortunately, that level of support is uncommon at present. For the time being, anyone interested in the mod scene had better come equipped with a fast net connection and lots of spare time. ●

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS (OFFICIAL SITE)  
[nwn.bioware.com](http://nwn.bioware.com)





## Day of Defeat Undefeated

*Day of Defeat* just keeps going. The team-based multiplayer combat mod that takes *Half-Life* back to the Second World War has just entered the public beta stage of version 3.0. More of everything has been tossed into this edition. Topping the list is the new "para" game type that recreates what it was like to take part in a WW II airborne operation. Allied and Axis paratrooper classes and models are included for use with this option, along with three maps set in various Western European locales. Other additions include six new weapons, cutscenes that show crucial objectives at the beginning of play and set an appropriate mood, an enhanced spectator mode, and even helmets that can be shot off for the remainder of the current round. Go to the *Day of Defeat* site for the latest.

### DAY OF DEFEAT (OFFICIAL SITE)

[www.dayofdefeatmod.com](http://www.dayofdefeatmod.com)

## An Army of One

Thank the American taxpayer for *America's Army: Operations*. The new first-person shooter comes courtesy of a U.S. Army recruiting program and can be downloaded free of charge from dozens of sites online. And this isn't a case where you get what you pay for. *America's Army* is a commercial-quality release on the same plane as tactical shooters like *Rogue Spear*, powered by the *Unreal* engine. A stripped-down version of the final product called *Recon* was released on the Fourth of July, with updates planned every few weeks through the summer. The full game—which is expected to include a full single-player campaign complete with a "you're in the Army now" storyline featuring roleplaying

elements—should be available around the time you read this. You can keep up to date with the progress of *America's Army* by visiting the official website.

### AMERICA'S ARMY (OFFICIAL SITE)

[www.americasarmy.com](http://www.americasarmy.com)

## Kohan Lives Up to its Subtitle

TimeGate Studios continues the pattern of near-monthly releases of official add-ons to *Kohan: Immortal Sovereigns* with a new mod tool. The program gives users the ability to make their own *Kohan* scenarios. Players can modify the stats of existing units, create new units based on templates provided by the originals, assign new game sounds or change the old ones, and even make up new rules. The mod tool is only available to subscribers to the *Kohan* email newsletter. For more on how to sign up for the newsletter, go to the TimeGate Studios website.

### TIMEGATE STUDIOS (KOHAN: IMMORTAL SOVEREIGNS)

[www.timegate.com](http://www.timegate.com)

## High Heat 2003 Tune Up

If entering the stretch drive of the Major League season has gotten you playing *High Heat Major League Baseball 2003* again, consider improving the realism of your games with a new tune file. HighHeat2003.net has nearly a dozen tune files, offering wide variations on what people think should be the big league experience. One caveat—these tunes are largely intended to help the game mimic the often brutal nature of Major League pitching, so they generally aren't for novices. Of

course, if a strike has been called by the time that this issue hits newsstands, please disregard the above suggestion and destroy everything related to Major League Baseball's gluttonous owners and players currently in your home.

### HIGHHEAT2003.NET

[www.sportplanet.com/highheat](http://www.sportplanet.com/highheat)

## Jedi Knight II Patched, Twice

Two recent updates to *Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast* have been released through the good graces of Raven Software and LucasArts. Versions 1.03 and 1.04 incorporate a variety of new components and fixes, including four new multiplayer Duel levels with bots, force feedback mouse support, and a number of multiplayer tweaks. All of the additions from both patches have been incorporated in version 1.04, so downloading both files isn't necessary. Check out the official *Jedi Knight II* website for more information.

### JEDI KNIGHT II (OFFICIAL SITE)

[www.lucasarts.com/products/outcast/html/](http://www.lucasarts.com/products/outcast/html/)



Enlist in *America's Army*. >>> Make hitting even harder with a High Heat tune file.



### BARGAIN BIN

#### Shogun: Total War

Just 15 bucks will get you a copy of *Shogun: Total War*, one of the best strategy games ever made about medieval Japan. Okay, so it's one of the *only* strategy games ever made about medieval Japan—it's still filled with strategic and tactical options that bring Japanese history to life. If you've turned in your empties, consider the *Warlord Edition* with added features and a new campaign. [Electronic Arts/2000]





Anyone who counts computer gaming as their hobby knows that it's hard to let go of some titles. Find something that catches your interest and you enter Joseph Heller territory, a catch-22 state of mind where you want to play the game in question around the clock without ever actually finishing it. You'll gladly sacrifice food, friends, and the requisite eight hours of shuteye to reach the end of a great game, yet still grow weepy-eyed when you actually get there.

Thanks to an exclusive group of obsessive fans

(most of whom have completely adopted the personas of the quirky names you'll see below), it's now possible to play a lot of oldies but goodies for as long as you want without ever reaching the end of the line.

Modifications and add-ons are still produced for a select number of games from the mid-1990s, which is about a century ago in PC game years. And communities continue to support older massively multiplayer games, even in the face of

modern competition like *EverQuest* and *Dark Age of Camelot*. Specific reasons for titles hanging around long past their Best Before date are varied, depending on both the game in question and its genre. First-person action games typically improve on their predecessors, meaning that play-



## Keeping it Going

The never-ending game is now at hand

by Brett Todd

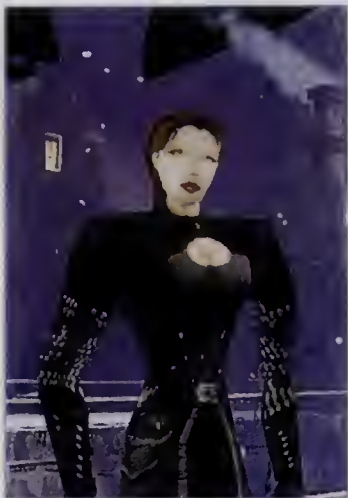
ers almost always abandon an old favorite for the next big thing. This gives each game in the genre a short shelf life, unless it has something unique to offer.

### Thieves

Like Looking Glass's *Thief* series, for instance. *Thief: The Dark Project* and *Thief II: The Metal Age* provided story, setting, and gameplay that gamers simply couldn't find anywhere else. The well-told tales, atmosphere reminiscent of the gloomiest gothic fiction, and topsy-turvy gameplay that made avoiding enemies far more important than killing them, worked together to fashion a one-of-a-kind experience. Even today, nearly four years after the release of the first game and over two years after the release of the second, followers continue to expand on the thieving exploits of Garrett, the title cutpurse with a knack for getting into dicey situations.

"*Thief's* Dark Engine is so powerful. It allows you to twist the realities of the game, it allows you to tell a story on your own terms," says Purah (better known as Anthony Huso to friends and family), who hosts the *Thief*-dedicated The Pub of Purah website and is the principal designer of an epic series of *Thief II* missions collected under the titles of Calendra's Cistern and Calendra's Legacy. "Most importantly, it allows you to tell a story: like in the *Seventh Crystal*, *Lord Edmund Entertains*, *Calendra's Legacy* and other fan-made missions. I think there is a large audience for games that pay more attention to story. It helps that Garrett is a mysterious character. You want to find out who he talks to, where he goes, what he does."

Purah isn't alone in his appreciation of the *Thief* franchise and its leading man. In addition to the *Calendra* series, which he created with the assistance of fellow part-time taffers Datoy, Loanstar, Saturnina, Thumper, and Laz, nearly a dozen fan-made missions were posted to The



Same of the beautiful scenery in Calendra's Legacy for *Thief II*.



Circle of Stone and Shadow websites the month before this article went to press. The recent lineup includes stellar efforts such as SkarzaMJA's *Trial By Night* and Xarax's *Heart and Soul for Thief* and *Thief Gold*, and Schwaa's *Three Mages Tomb* and Belboz's *The Trickster's Gem Mine: Making Tracks for Thief II*. Dig back into the archives at The Circle of Stone and Shadow, The Keep of Metal and Gold, and Thief Underground sites and you'll uncover more fan missions than you can possibly play, many on par with what Looking Glass developed for the original games.

### Totally Obi-Wan

The same can be said of the fan missions available for *Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II* and its *Mysteries of the Sith* expansion, released way back in 1997 and 1998. The Star Wars

saga of Obi-Wannabe Kyle Katarn and his struggle against evil Lord Jerec is still going strong despite the recent release of *Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast*. Although a number of devotees have moved their modding efforts to the new game, many continue to support its elderly forefather. There are over a thousand multiplayer and nearly 800 single-player maps to be found on the leading *Jedi Knight* site, The Massassi Temple, and more are being added. Credit this astonishing success story to the game's captivating story and the eternal appeal of getting to play in George Lucas's sandbox.

"Speaking as a player of *Jedi Knight*, as an

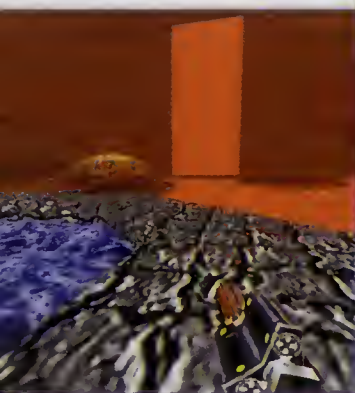
■ Modifications and add-ons are still being produced for a select number of games from the mid-1990s, which is about a century ago in PC game years ■

*Jedi Knight* for some time to come. According to him, *Jedi Outcast* will slow things down. "But *Jedi Knight* will still be played and edited for probably several years. Just tonight I spoke to an editor friend of mine who is working on a seven-level *Jedi Knight* single-player project based on his own storyline that is not *Star Wars*-related. There are people whose computers aren't powerful enough

to run *Jedi Outcast*, and there are those who just enjoy editing a game so easily, compared with games like *Quake III Arena*."

### More strategic

Real-time strategy is another genre that boasts followers dedicated to keeping a few aged favorites alive and kicking. The most popular of these oldtimers is arguably Westwood Studios's groundbreaking *Command & Conquer: Red Alert*, first



editor/modder of *Jedi Knight*, and as someone who's helped run a *Jedi Knight* site for a few years, I'd say the main reason for the popularity of the game is that it's

so easy to edit it," explains Massassi Temple system operator Adam "blu-jay" Porter. "Most of its resource files are plain text, so they're not hard to edit. The community has made many programs to assist in the editing of *Jedi Knight*, such as the level/model editor Jed, the animation editor PuppetJedi, the texture-converter MatMaster, and others."

As you can tell by the stats noted above, multiplayer maps are the most popular subjects for *Jedi Knight* modders. Some of the best additions of late include *Haven of Shadows*, a massive level by BigCarm where you're forced to hunt down the opposition, and Mystic0's *Temple of Flames*, which features a temple complex set amidst rivers of lava. Stormie's *Jedi Master Episode 2: The Special Edition* tops the list of recent single-player mission releases, although you won't want to miss FoolsParadise's *Corellian Orbital Shipyards* and Matthew Surman's *Rebel Agent*.

Porter thinks that fans will continue to produce missions and maps for

released way back in 1995.

Although there is understandably more support for the numerous later games in the series, such as *Tiberian Dawn* and *Red Alert 2*, new user-made missions and mods appear every couple of weeks at Planet Command & Conquer (to the bemusement of system operator HeXetic, who recently called them "memory lane files" in a site update).

Emanuel Rabina's Campaign Ultraq: The Battle Between Good and Evil, a 20-mission expansion using units from *Command & Conquer* and *Red Alert* to bridge the historical gap between the two

(left to right) The fiery terrain in Mystic0's *Temple of Flames* for *Jedi Knight*. >>> The Eveready Bunny of MMORPGs—The Realm. >>> Rebel Agent sees Kyle Kotorn taking on the evil Empire one more time. >>> One of the more ainous locations in *Making Tracks*.



games, debuted in the first week of June, as did the Infected Terrain map developed by Arie-Jan, a "fast build" mod by J Jusk, and a weapons add-on by Mikkel Schmidt that features chemical sprays and different colored laser beams. Fifty missions, 45 maps, 14 structures, 31 units, and 42 miscellaneous modifications have been added to the Planet Command & Conquer *Red Alert* archive since late 2000, and this steady flow of user-designed content shows no sign of slowing.

Another real-time strategy title that continues to bear the mod-makers seal of approval is Cavedog's *Total Annihilation*. Even though the game's fifth birthday is fast approaching, users are still giving it lots of support. New units are being posted nearly every day at Planet Annihilation and hosted sites like Unlimited Units, giving you the opportunity to completely customize gameplay. Maps, mods, campaigns, new races, and total conversions featuring everything from World War II's Operation Barbarossa to George Lucas's *Star Wars* universe are also still being produced.

### Hyper (sub)space

One of the first pay-for-play online massively multiplayer roleplaying games remains alive and kicking six years after its launch. *The Realm Online*, which was first conceived in 1996, when even *Ultima Online* was a mere glint in Richard Garriott's eye, retains a sizable portion of its original fan base. Despite an ancient 16-color graphics engine (very similar to what powered the *King's Quest* games over a decade ago) and competition from the likes of the aforementioned *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, and *Dark Age of Camelot*—that caused original developer/publisher Sierra On-Line to transfer the game to Codemasters in 2000—*The Realm* is still going strong. While exact membership stats are difficult to determine, nearly 9,000 users have registered to use the official game forums, which feature lively discussion. Again, the established community appears to be the major draw, along with the storyline constantly being developed by Codemasters staffers.

Similar numbers continue to play Virgin's *SubSpace*. The multiplayer action title, which debuted in 1995 under the name of *Sniper*, has at least 1,200 players online at any given time despite its commercial failure. If anything, the simplistic but addictive game of space combat has grown more popular since Virgin abandoned attempts to make a buck off of it. Players have modified the now-freeware game with a client upgrade called *Continuum*, improving graphics, gameplay, and server options. *SubSpace* has grown in popularity to the point where numerous servers host the game, giving players the opportu-

nity to explore dozens of gameplay zones, each with different settings, and meet new people from all over the globe.

"A big part of *SubSpace* is the community," says Goddess, who got hooked along with her husband in 1997 and currently writes horoscopes for players at SubspaceDownloads.com. "The game has been around for so long, and many of the players have been there for years, so you have friendships and friendly banter. It's like a game and a chat all rolled into one."

FaLen AnGel, another system administrator at SubspaceDownloads.com and a five-year *SubSpace* veteran who spends a part of each day on the T3 Gauntlet zone, echoes Goddess: "The human aspect and interaction during play, chat, and work on projects for the *SubSpace/Continuum* community are what drive the growth and popularity of the game today. The average player has the opportunity to learn, contribute, and staff at most any level if dedication is shown."

That level of enthusiasm could probably be applied across the board to fans of all of the older games discussed above. The amount of dedication required to maintain such ardor is significant, especially when you consider the effort required to make a good mission or design an enjoyable multiplayer map. It is even more remarkable when you think about how such obviously hardcore gamers pass up the chance to play and modify new titles. Passion like that ensures that classic games from yesteryear will go on as long as people have the hardware to run them. ●

### BADD COGG'S GALLERY

[schwaa.0catch.com/MenuPage.html](http://schwaa.0catch.com/MenuPage.html)

### THE KEEP OF METAL AND GOLD

[www.keepofmetalandgold.com](http://www.keepofmetalandgold.com)

### THE MASSASSI TEMPLE

[www.massassi.net](http://www.massassi.net)

### PLANET COMMAND & CONQUER

[www.planetcnc.com](http://www.planetcnc.com)

### THE PUB OF PURAH

[www.aros.net/~purah/splash](http://www.aros.net/~purah/splash)

### THE REALM ONLINE

[www.realmserver.com](http://www.realmserver.com)

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### SUBSPACEDOWNLOADS.COM

[subspacedownloads.com](http://subspacedownloads.com)

### SUBSPACEHQ.COM

[www.subspacehq.com](http://www.subspacehq.com)

### TAMEC MOD EVALUATIONS

[www.planetannihilation.com/tamec](http://www.planetannihilation.com/tamec)

### THIEF: THE CIRCLE OF STONE AND SHADOW

[www.thief-darkproject.com](http://www.thief-darkproject.com)

### THIEF UNDERGROUND

[www.3dactionplanet.com/thief/fms.asp](http://www.3dactionplanet.com/thief/fms.asp)

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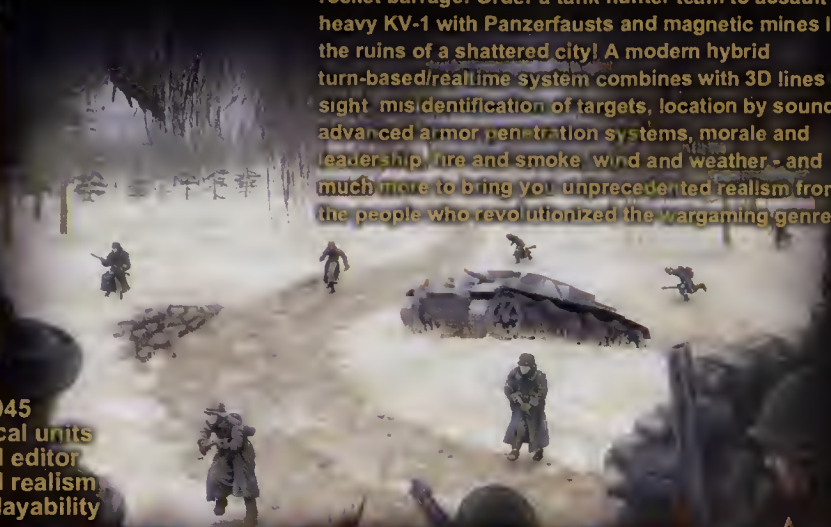
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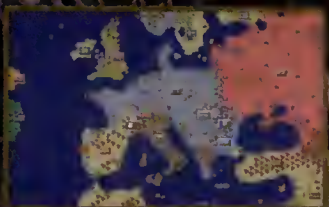


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## On Dungeon Siege and WarCraft III

Revisionist history with Chris Taylor of Gas Powered Games and Bill Roper of Blizzard Entertainment

by Andrew S. Bub

Chris Taylor cut his teeth on Accolade's *Hardball* series, but is best known for his work on the innovative real-time strategy game *Total Annihilation*. He founded Gas Powered Games and partnered with Microsoft for *Dungeon Siege*. It offers party-based *Diablo*-style gameplay coupled with a remarkably flexible graphics engine that lets you seamlessly move from subterranean/indoor locations to the great outdoors. Taylor is enthusiastic and earnest, almost to a fault, and had plenty to say regarding his most recent game.

### What did you learn from *Dungeon Siege* that you'll apply to your next game?

We learned a lot of stuff, but I guess it only makes sense to highlight some of the big lessons. First, I would have to say that when you are working on a project as large as this, it's important to have well defined development processes in place. You can't wing it like you can on smaller projects. It's critical to get the team communicating really efficiently and the right company philosophies in place to support this (including weekly reports, proper use of email, and a variety of other methods). Pre-production is also very important, and the whole process of taking ideas

through a concept phase and then final approval before starting production.

I admit I was never a big believer in a lot of this stuff before *Dungeon Siege*, but like I said, on a project this large, you have to embrace these large project practices or you end up with a lot of waste and unhappy people.

One of the main strengths of the game is the party AI, but many complain that you could virtually play the game on autopilot. Do you think maybe you guys did too good a job of it?

It's hard to tell exactly what those people experienced who found that the game was too easy, but it is my guess that they didn't set the difficulty high enough for their particular skill level. Naturally, there is no way for us to know before the game starts how skilled a player is,

but we do allow the player to change the difficulty at any time in the event the player does think it's too easy. If you can play through *Dungeon Siege* on the hard setting and find that it is not challenging, it's my guess that you are a very

skilled player and should take that as a compliment.

You are known for your strong personality, but both *Total Annihilation* and *Dungeon Siege*, are rather lacking in personality. Why is that the case?

The short answer is that I have always believed that it is key to the success of a



Bill Roper of Blizzard Entertainment and Chris Taylor of Gas Powered Games

game to focus on the core experience, the actual gameplay, before moving on to the more abstract elements of the experience like the story. In the two examples you have given, I had to build a team and all the core technology from scratch, and do it in a risky environment—a start-up company environment. You can imagine how excited we are here to work on our next generation games and do it from the established position we have built (established company, team, technology, infrastructure and process). This gives us a much better chance of spending quality time to focus on the story, and that overall "personality" of the game that you mention.

Bill Roper is the Vice President of Blizzard Entertainment, certainly one of the most successful studios in gaming. The company puts considerable refinement into each release and has earned a tremendous and loyal fan base. It has just released *WarCraft III* and is currently working on *Worlds of Warcraft*, a massively multiplayer role-playing game based on the same universe.



Which is more important to a Blizzard game, story or multiplayer?

They're both equally important. Both of them really provide value to the player. Not everyone has the ability, or desire, to go online, so it's really important to us that they have a great game to play, and at the same time we know that a huge base of our audience loves to go online and compete. So we have to make sure they're both equally compelling.



WarCraft III tells its story well, and that can't be easy in the real-time strategy genre. Do you storyboard it out and then make the missions fit, or does the story evolve from the missions you plan?

It's a little of both, but in the case of *WarCraft III* it was driven by the storyline first. When our story guys sit down and work through storyline stuff they do it in conjunction with the design teams (mission designers). It's really driven by the story team but as they go through and start creating the levels and laying out the campaign, different ideas will come up, or someone will have a great idea for a map and they'll want to build that into the story. I'd say that even though *WarCraft III* was driven by the story the level designers were definitely co-pilots.

The game was first promoted as a role-playing/strategy hybrid. It retains some of those elements, but what are some of the things that got dropped as development went on?

When we first announced the game and were talking about it being a role-playing strategy game. We worked very hard to put an emphasis on the role-playing side of that. Initially we went really far with that: we had the camera angle low and over-the-shoulder, like in a RPG. And we made the heroes really vital in that units had to be attached to them. Units could only move when they were attached to a hero. As we started

planning the game out, we found that both of those elements were not really conducive to a strategy game. I think what threw people off though, was changing the camera angle. Suddenly the game didn't look like an RPG anymore, even though we still had experience, leveling, unique spells and abilities for heroes, and people started assuming we got rid of all the role-playing stuff.

What's the deal with that skilrmish AI? It seems awfully vicious; it's almost too good and is wiping the floor with most players...

That's due to the fact that so many people complained with our previous games that the AI was too easy. Well, now we've changed that and there are people saying



it's too hard. We wanted to provide players out there who want to be competitive with a challenge, something to really test their skill against.

So when is *StarCraft II* coming out?

(Laughs) We're not working on *StarCraft II*. So, who knows when it's going to come out? We do love *StarCraft* and want to go back to [it] and I'm sure we'll do another one some day. Everyone asks this question and it's hard to say no. But the answer is that we're just not working on it right now. ●

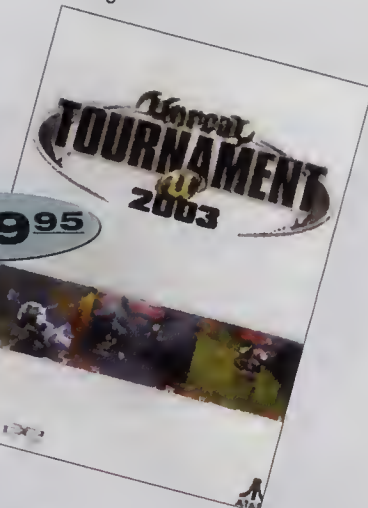




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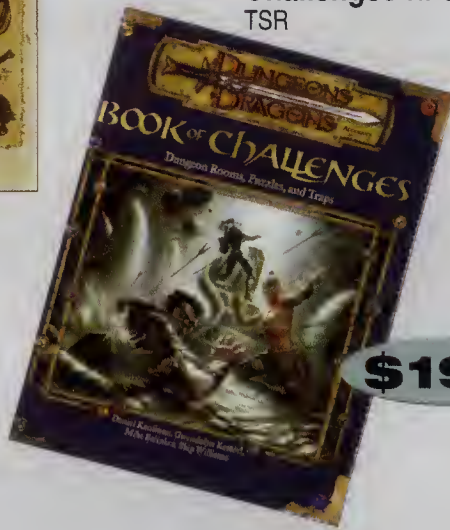
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A few readers wrote in complaining about the review/preview imbalance in the August issue. "I don't give a rat's ass if it's a 'preview edition' or not, this is out of control!," asserts Scott Steiner. "[Previews] are always sappy and ridiculously positive." Hey, we try to present the info as neutral as possible. If you come away with a positive impression, chances are you just dig the game's features. Unlike others, we don't feel the need to tell you everything is GOING TO BLOW YOU AWAY!!! Moving on, Jess wrote in complaining about the positive tone of Rebound. "In all the other magazines I read, the letters section is filled with humorous, hateful letters," he says. "In yours, all there is are these sappy letters saying how great you guys are. What's the deal?" Hey, they ripped us off, as we've been doing the whole negative thing for years now. So turnabout is fair play—we're ripping off their monthly love-fests. Or maybe lately we've been sucking less than we did in the past. We'll try a lot harder to annoy our readers.

## Shallow

August's Upfront column really hit home with me ["Shallow Steve," CGM 141]. I'm sixteen, and everything you said really rang true, even to me. Society stereotypes us teens as acne-scarred, think-glassed, voice cracking outcasts. Young gamers like me are often looked down upon as inferior, and if you mention it in conversation ("I play computer games four hours a day..."), well, good luck trying to get an ounce of respect. True, we control much of the pop-culture, but gamers don't have the luxury of gloating about it. Instead, many of us just keep our secret gaming hobby quiet and lead healthy social lives.

Your article about the insecurities of being a gamer applies to all of us, whether we wish to admit it or not. Your quality columns are the kind of articles that really make your magazine stand out. Keep up the outstanding work; you're really making a difference.

Andrew Fournard1ds

## Literate

Ah, *Computer Games Magazine*, the final refuge of literacy in today's gaming printscape. We've been over this before, of course, but in this case I doubt it can hurt to reinforce certain understandings. And now, without further ado, a little (sincere, well-deserved) ego-stroking...

Where would the gaming community be without you? With the enduring idea that gamers expect a little T&A along with their T&L, there's been precious little time,

effort and resources invested by the major publications to maintain formerly lofty journalistic standards.

That's why I like your magazine so much. It sustains that former zing that used to characterize the electronic entertainment publications. There's a wholesome, steadfast, though never stodgy, quality to your writing. But I am ever willing to cease my subscription if I ever catch you mentioning the name KillCreek more than ten times in an issue.

What I do wonder, though, is what exactly is the cause of the wholesale cheapening of your slice of the industry? Is it an isolated event that merely parallels the similar degrading of the products themselves, or is it symptomatic of a larger problem?

Perhaps it is simply a reflection of the changing demographics. The children of the early days of the industry, having grown to adulthood, have entered the periphery of the market, and no longer command the attention that the *DOOM* generation currently finds lavished upon itself.

For whatever reason, *Computer Games* has resisted the trend. I don't know where you got the idea that some gamers may actually enjoy reading something substantive, but it's this revolutionary thinking that wins subscribers. Thanks.

Erik Post

## Eternal Debates

I look at game forums and I see tons and tons of threads mainly about one thing: this game is better than that game, my game rox, your

game sux0rz, and so on. I'm tired of those people who constantly post things like *Neverwinter Nights* is better than *Dungeon Siege*, *Neverwinter Nights* sux so play *Morrowind*. Why don't any of these people realize that they're all completely different games? Maybe they should just go post something like *Neverwinter Nights* versus *Pong*.

Guess who'd win?

Lord Asriel

*Pong* is the premiere ball and paddle experience, the defining game of its genre. But *Neverwinter Nights* is okay, and if such a debate did take place, it could win if the debater used a lot of really creative cuss words and/or the *Pong* person accidentally invoked the "Hitler" rule of online discussions. And everyone knows that *Quake* is better than *Unreal*. So there. —ed

## Hardware Love

Over the years, I've usually subscribed to two gaming magazines. Now I'm down to one and its CGM. The main reason? The hardware section. Compared to the competition, yours is more detailed and enlightening. Does this help me become a better gamer? Maybe not, but I enjoy learning and reading about how things work.

Tom Moulton

## Nose Vomit

I made the mistake of eating lunch while reading Tom Chick's Three Finger salute in the August issue. Some of my bologna





sandwich exited through my nose I laughed so hard! Hit the friggin' nail on the head.

Tammy

We may have to use this as a disclaimer: WARNING: READING THE MAGAZINE WHILE EATING MAY INDUCE NOSE VOMIT. —ed

## Illegal Skateboarding

About Tom Chick's Three Fingered Salute in the August issue ["For the Knees of the Children"].

Skateboarding is not a crime.

Lee Istvanavich

## Learning Games

I totally agree with Tom Chick's "Three Finger Salute." I've always told my mom that I learn more from computer games and Tom Clancy books than I do from school. I learn things every child should know such as how many shots it takes to kill someone by shooting them in the foot and what people really do when they have C4 strapped to their head. I also learned physics through *Red Faction* and their GeoMod engine.

Anatomically correct violent computer games hold the key to education and young people's futures!

Matt Saladin

## More Violence

I have to write in because of how great your "Three Finger Salute" column in August. It's just, well, true. Sure, games like *Grand Theft Auto III* get bad raps because they are so violent, but what about the truly violent games? In *Baldur's Gate II*, you could slaughter whole towns and kill legions of good Amnish soldiers with families. And what about flight simulators? You can take jumbo jets with lots of passengers and crew and crash it over and over into the nearest building. It never specifies whether or not they're empty.

Games like *Grand Theft Auto* can be good for teaching kids about laws and what not to do. You can even become a vigilante and kill evil gang members or corrupted cops. Congress people need to get themselves straight and fight against the real menace of the truly evil video games.

KabraKiller

Schools across the country are adding *Grand Theft Auto* to their curriculum. —ed

## Naked Elves

Regarding "Inside the Sausage" in the August issue ["Finding the Naked Elf"], I just would like to say, what's the point? I see no need to bother censoring the nymph girl when in order to even tell you must be at 300% zoom. Nobody is actually looking to zoom in on the nymph girl except some small perverted preteen with hormones raging looking to get a cheap thrill. So why bother censoring it just so they can play the game, when even Shallow Steve prints "The IDSA says 97% of people who actually purchase computer games are over 18." I say if they want ogle scantily clad nonexistent women, they're better off buying comic books or anime, they're much cheaper.

On another note, I'd like to praise Tom Chick for the continuing greatness that is his "Three Finger Salute". It is always the first column I read, and usually the best. The sarcastic attitude presented reminds me of all the gamers I know personally. Your observations are that of a true gamer. For this, I salute you (with three fingers of course).

Andrew K.

## Doomed Razors

After looking at the screen shots of *Doom III*, I was reminded of another Tom Lehrer quote (from Bright College Days): "Soon we'll be sliding down the razor blade of life."

Irma Daherty

## Enablers

Just wanted to drop a line to tell you how much I love your magazine. For the past few years, my boyfriend has been teaching me the "fine art of fragging," and I have (secretly and openly) enabled his hobby by purchasing hardware, software, and the ubiquitous gaming publications. Hey, the glossy covers and pretty pictures call to me...

I thoroughly enjoy the refreshing writing of your magazine. Kudos to you and the staff.

Angela Ferrannini

## Letters of the Dead

You should really consider changing the name of your magazine to *Computer Games of the Dead*. I personally give you my word that you will sell more copies than you ever have before, and if you don't sell more copies, I will let you

r() > < ()r /\ \y 5() > < ()rz.

(PS I will not actually let you r() > < ()r /\ \y 5() > < ()rz but plz print this so I will be cool.)

the reader formally known as bananamike

## Wookiee Love

With *Freedom Force*, you can now create your own Wookiee. May the force be with you.

Eddie "Yummy" Spaghetti

## Shot to the Head

As an avid reader and fan of your magazine, I feel compelled to continue the incoherent silliness that appears in the "Rebound" section of your magazine. In order for me to be cool, I must prove that I have been published in your magazine.

And so, I give you this gem of

knowledge:

"Headshots are for n00bs. 'Nuff said."

Thanks!

Madsarcerar

## Errata

In the preview of *Devastation* in the August issue, we said that developer Digitalo "produced" the Harry Potter game. That was an overstatement, as they did some direction on the cinematics, plus worked on some technical gameplay and level design.

Also in August, we incorrectly said that Westwood Studios is now known as EA Pacific. Its other office, Westwood Pacific, was turned into EA Pacific. The Las Vegas office remains Westwood Studios.

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# road to nowhere

## it's aliiiiive

No NPCs? So where's the cheese?

If you take a look at the upcoming *Asheron's Call 2*, *The Sims Online*, and *Shadowbane*, it seems that a lot of developers are relying heavily on the fact that a player-centric, player-run world is not only something that everyone wants, it's also the best way to make an online world develop in a more "organic" fashion. They also believe (and I find this a bit of a stretch) that it will work. Okay, no one said "work seamlessly," but hey, aren't these the people who know us well enough to know that our main purpose in life is to cheat, lie, steal, break, maim, exploit, hack, and ruin their games at all cost? Don't they know that if we can have our own fun at the expense of everyone else's that we will? Sure they do. But they're putting it in our hands anyway...

With its motto "One percent of the players will generate tons of content for the other 99 percent," *The Sims* will probably have a smooth transition to online, especially since it is limiting the kinds of things the one percent can put online. Instead of parallel worlds, or shards, *Shadowbane* is planning one immense server over which its

tive (to rebuild the torn world of Dereth), players will certainly see visual representation of their efforts. But they wanted to make sure that you could feel various micro-impacts as well. What's the cheese that they would have to place in the world that would actually attract people to it? Enter the Live Team, the future behind-the-scenes heroes of *Asheron's Call 2*.

The Live Team will have its Live Finger on the Live Pulse of the Live Game. They'll be able to gauge what the players are doing, and implement effects on the fly, plant buildings, erode them... Cool! It's the next best thing to having a full cast of Live NPCs. The thing that set *Asheron's Call* apart from the rest of the lineup was its variety of consistent world "events." Now, the Live Team and Microsoft are going to have the summaries of 12 planned episodes that comprise the first story arc at a very

high overview level leaving lots of room for players to impact where the story goes. A high enough level, in fact, that if players do something that real-

■ Don't they know that if we can have our own fun at the expense of everyone else's that we will? ■

designers think that its players will orderly strew themselves so as not to clog any particular corner of the universe at any one time. "If it gets crowded here, then we'll just dream up something that makes them go there" is their handy but untested solution. And *Asheron's Call 2* [see the preview on page 48] plans a world with no non-player characters, one they're promising will allow our behaviors to shape the economy and to actually affect the gameworld.

With no NPCs, two main questions arise: 1) Where can I buy and sell stuff? and 2) Who's going to ask me to destroy the Priapus of Bobbitt and to bring back its head? The first issue is solved by the Law of Rumplestiltskin. Everyone has the skill to spin anything they don't want directly into gold. You can also buy, sell, or trade with other players. The second issue took a bit more imagination. Sometimes objects or items will convey quests. For instance, you might kill a monster and its dropped object will have a quest attached to it. It might say something like, "I am the Blood Drinker sword, that needs to have this, this, and this." Then, if you can get or accomplish these things, the sword might convert to a more powerful sword and that affects your attack rating.

Turbine President and CEO Jeff Anderson told me that the most valuable thing they learned from *Asheron's Call* in terms of what people thought was the most fun had to do with when players actually interacted with the storyline. While slowly satisfying the game's macro-objec-

ly seems to work out better than the designers planned, the Live Team will be right on hand and will be able to implement its effects. They will continue the planned monthly events from *AC*, but many will be a series of quests that you don't have to be the first to finish, providing a bit of non-linearity within the story. "Even if you're the 100th player to do it," explains Anderson, "you're still going to get those images; you're still going to get the feeling of being the hero." Will the "collective we" cut them enough of a break to let the game evolve in order to see how this will pan out? I hope so, even though everyone knows that the collective contains an uncomfortably large number of \$#!+ heads. Of course, there's always the ability to move out of the neighborhood (change shards), but you know what they say about "the devil you know..." ●



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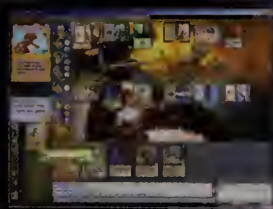
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# INSIDE the sausage factory

## *i hate 3D*

Pissing and moaning from an old-school gamer/developer

**3D graphics** are about to take control of the last 2D holdout, PC strategy games. I say that with a heavy heart, because I think this transition will result in fewer, less attractive, and generally worse games for the strategy genre. Still, my company, PopTop, and most other strategy developers, has jumped on-board the 3D bandwagon, out of necessity if not enthusiasm.

I spent some time this weekend with the new king of 3D strategy games, *WarCraft III*. I know it's supposed to be a great looking game, being Blizzard and 3D and all that, but frankly, I found it unappealing. Even on a high end gaming system, character poly counts are low, lighting models are relatively simplistic, and in general, the game does not look as good as games using pre-rendered sprites, including older Blizzard titles. You virtually ignore the primary virtue of a 3D engine—the free moving camera—when actually playing the game. You essentially keep your camera rotation and zoom fixed and scroll around exactly like a 2D game. Previous major 3D strategy titles like *Empire Earth*, *Black & White*, and *Warzone 2100* also had low-detail characters and cumbersome camera control.

Unfortunately, major game developers realize that unless they move to 3D, their game will receive minimal hype and will be passed over by the press and public as dated-looking. *Tropico*, released last year, had (in this immodest developer's view), excellent 2D graphics, with pre-rendered characters modeled with tens of thousands of polygons and hundreds of frames of animation. Yet some reviews complained of a "dated look." The new 3D games have, if they're lucky, 200-300 polygons per character, with a low-detail look and simplistic, single source lighting models.

We've joined the herd and our upcoming game will be full 3D. We're fortunate in that our game has no characters, only buildings and vehicles. Their sharp-edges and squared-off shapes look better at low poly counts than curvy characters. Still, if the game itself would probably look better in straight pre-rendered 2D, but I have to be realistic about the marketplace.

Beyond the low-detail look, 3D causes many other problems. Developing and optimizing a 3D engine is an order of magnitude more complex than a 2D one. PopTop has grown from two full-time programmers on *Tropico* to five on our current title, and we're still behind schedule. We're fortunate to have the resources to compete with other leading-edge strategy developers, but smaller developers are being squeezed out. Flying Labs Studios released *Rails Across America*, a nice looking, but definitely 2D strategy game, to outstanding reviews last fall, but the game's retro look failed to inspire consumers. It sold poorly, and Flying Labs abandoned plans for follow ups and is now scrambling for capital to license a 3D engine and make a mainstream 3D game. *Kohan* won many "Strategy Game of the Year" awards last year [This one included -ed], but also saw its 2D look meet with consumer disinterest. Its developer as well is

moving to a licensed 3D engine for the sequel. A modern 3D game costs about three times as much to develop as a 2D strategy title of a couple years ago. As costs triple, barring significant market growth, only about one-third as many titles will be released.

The move to 3D will not only reduce the number of games produced, it will reduce the number of consumers who can play the games. The rule of thumb used to be that you tried to make your game run on any PC less than three years old. A 2D game relies almost entirely on CPU speed to run. The difference between CPU speed on a modern, top-of-the-line Pentium 4 (circa 2.5GHz), and a three-year-old PC with a Pentium II (circa 300MHz) results in a 8-10 fold speed difference. A well-crafted game can support this range of processing power, and indeed, a 300 MHz PC can run most modern 2D games.

However, for 3D games, performance is almost solely a result of the 3D card, and the blistering progress of 3D technology means that a modern GeForce 4 outpaces a three-year old ATI Rage Pro by 50-100 fold in raw speed. In addition, it features many entirely new types of features that aren't possible at any speed on older hardware. It is effectively impossible for a modern 3D game to support three-year old low end 3D cards. Generally, a gamer is lucky if his or her 18-month old 3D card will work in newer games, and all bets are off when *Doom III* is released.

When fewer PCs are capable of running your game, your sales fall. From 1999 to 2001, the PC genres that most rapidly jumped aboard the 3D bandwagon (shooters, simulation, racing, and sports) saw total sales drop by 10%. Strategy, which until this year has been largely 2D, has grown by 67% in the same timeframe. Other factors play into this, but I think rapid technological obsolescence has hurt the other genres. And it will also start hurting the strategy genre, even as ballooning budgets further hurt developers and reduce the number and variety of titles made.

3D is the future, and the future is depressing. ●



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# THREE finger salute

## god mode is for babies

...and other observations from a hardcore gamer

The distinction between the casual and hardcore gamer is an important one, because hardcore gamers don't want to be lumped in with all those people who've only played *The Sims* or *Myst* and who don't know anything about games except for hearing on the news that you can beat up hookers in *Grand Theft Auto*. It's also an important distinction for game developers, who are trying to make games for casual gamers because there are millions of them, as opposed to the several thousand hardcore gamers, many of whom might be dissuaded from buying a game for niggling details like it not being good. Casual gamers have no such compunction.

Unfortunately, game developers are invariably hardcore gamers who have no idea what casual gamers want beyond a nifty opening cinematic. A casual gamer will play anything with a nifty opening cinematic, because the whole idea of a computer game is new and surprising and look how clever it is that you can wear different kinds of armor and, oh my, I found a shotgun, how cool is that? A shotgun! Hardcore gamers are so over shotguns.

A casual gamer will actually stop moving when playing a first-person shooter. He might stand in one place and look around for a bit. He might even look down and wonder where his feet are. A casual gamer doesn't understand why someone wouldn't use the clearly labeled cursor keys instead of WASD, which doesn't stand for anything anyway.

The casual gamer will mention *Wordracer* on Yahoo as if it were a computer game. He will then call *WarCraft III* a video game. And he will have no idea why this annoys the hardcore gamer. The casual gamer will say things like, "Well, it's almost 11 o' clock and I have to work tomorrow, so I better save the game and turn in." Casual gamers don't know how to pronounce gib. Is it "gib" with a hard "g" or "jib?" They just don't know.

Casual gamers don't finish games. Because they're distracted so easily—"Hey look, you can make up your own name!"—they take so long playing them that they never get to the end. Hardcore gamers don't finish games either. They have so many games to get around to that it would be inconceivable to stick with just one long enough to finish it.

A casual gamer won't even notice what a mess it is trying to keep track of your quests in *Morrowind*'s journal, because he'll be satisfied running around trying to get people to like him. A hardcore gamer goes through *Morrowind* drumming the spacebar with his thumb to improve his character's jumping skill. A casual player thinks bunny-hopping is a dance from the Roaring Twenties.

It doesn't occur to the casual gamer that there's no way to see your units' waypoints in *WarCraft III*. A casual gamer will ask what waypoints are. When you ask a casual gamer if he's updated his drivers,

he'll give you the same blank look he gives you when you ask if he inverts his mouse.

The hardcore gamer inverts his mouse in a first-person shooter because he has spent years using a joystick and therefore associates moving a controller with steering the nose of an airplane or spaceship. The casual gamer doesn't own a joystick and, in fact, doesn't understand what on earth you would use one for. The casual gamer thinks Thrustmaster is a pretty silly name for a company. In fact, he might even be inclined to make jokes about the word "joystick." The hardcore gamer got that out of his system back in the 80s.

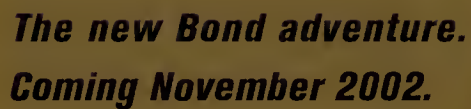
The hardcore gamer will begrudgingly buy a strategy guide because he wants to know how to play the game better. The casual gamer has no problem buying a strategy guide because he doesn't know there was a time strategy guides were called manuals and included with a game. The casual gamer wouldn't read a manual anyway.

The hardcore gamer can tell a rolled up copy of a gaming magazine tucked under someone's arm. He can spot an EB logo on a bag from fifty yards. Two hardcore gamers who are identified to each other will talk in much the same way as two people who pull up to a stoplight in the same car. But if one of them is a casual gamer, perhaps buying his nephew a birthday present, he might wonder why this weird guy is trying to talk to him.

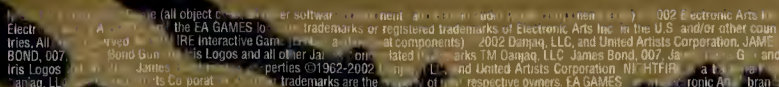
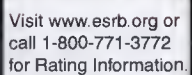
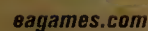
The hardcore gamer won't use cheat codes, because that's cheating. The casual gamer uses cheat codes to avoid frustration. In fact, a casual gamer might play all the way through *Medal of Honor* in god mode. And still enjoy it. "But you can't die," the hardcore gamer might explain to the casual gamer. "Ever."

"Yeah, isn't that cool?" the casual gamer will reply. "It makes these videogames so much easier." ●





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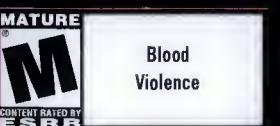




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